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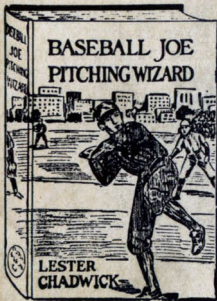


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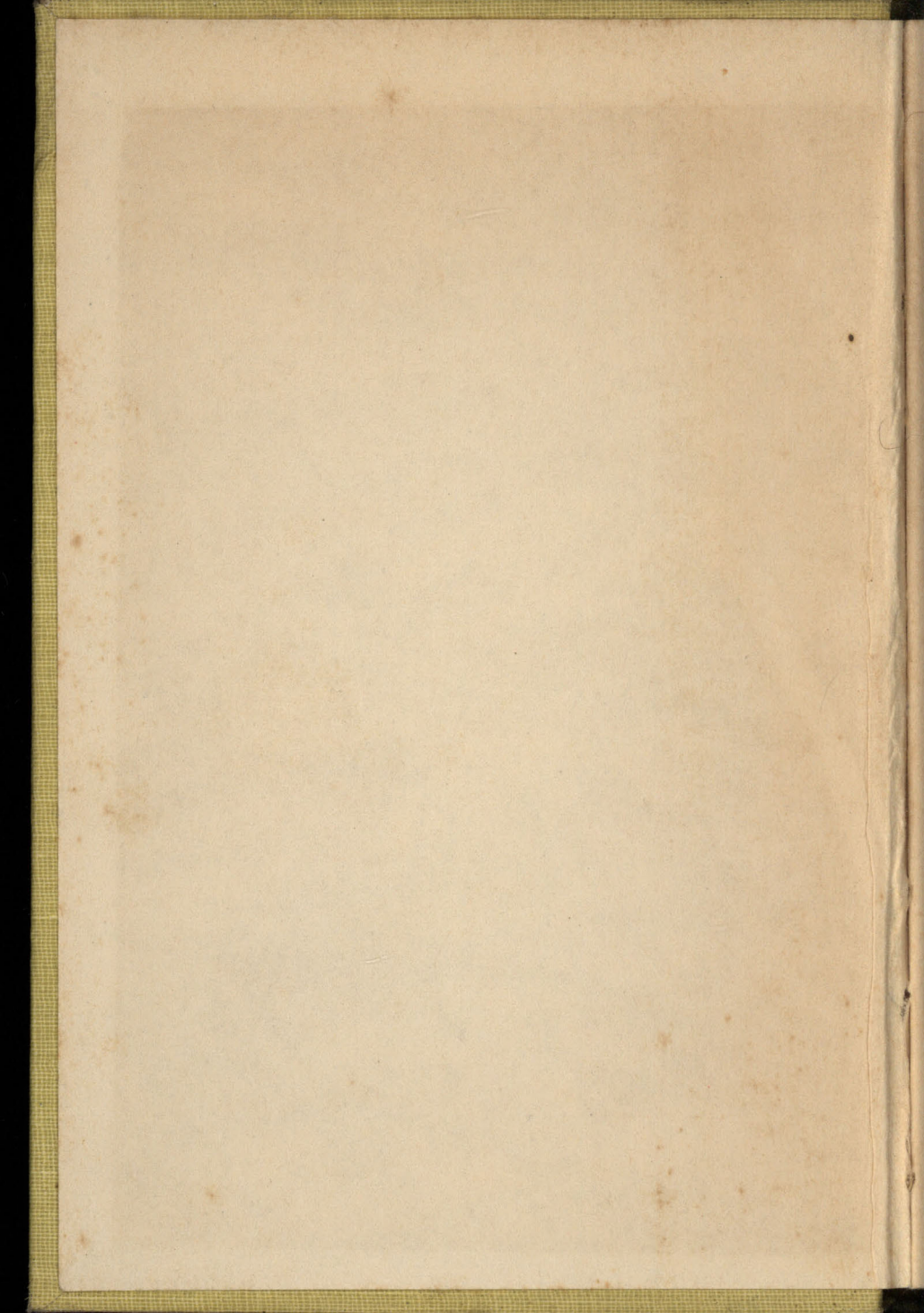
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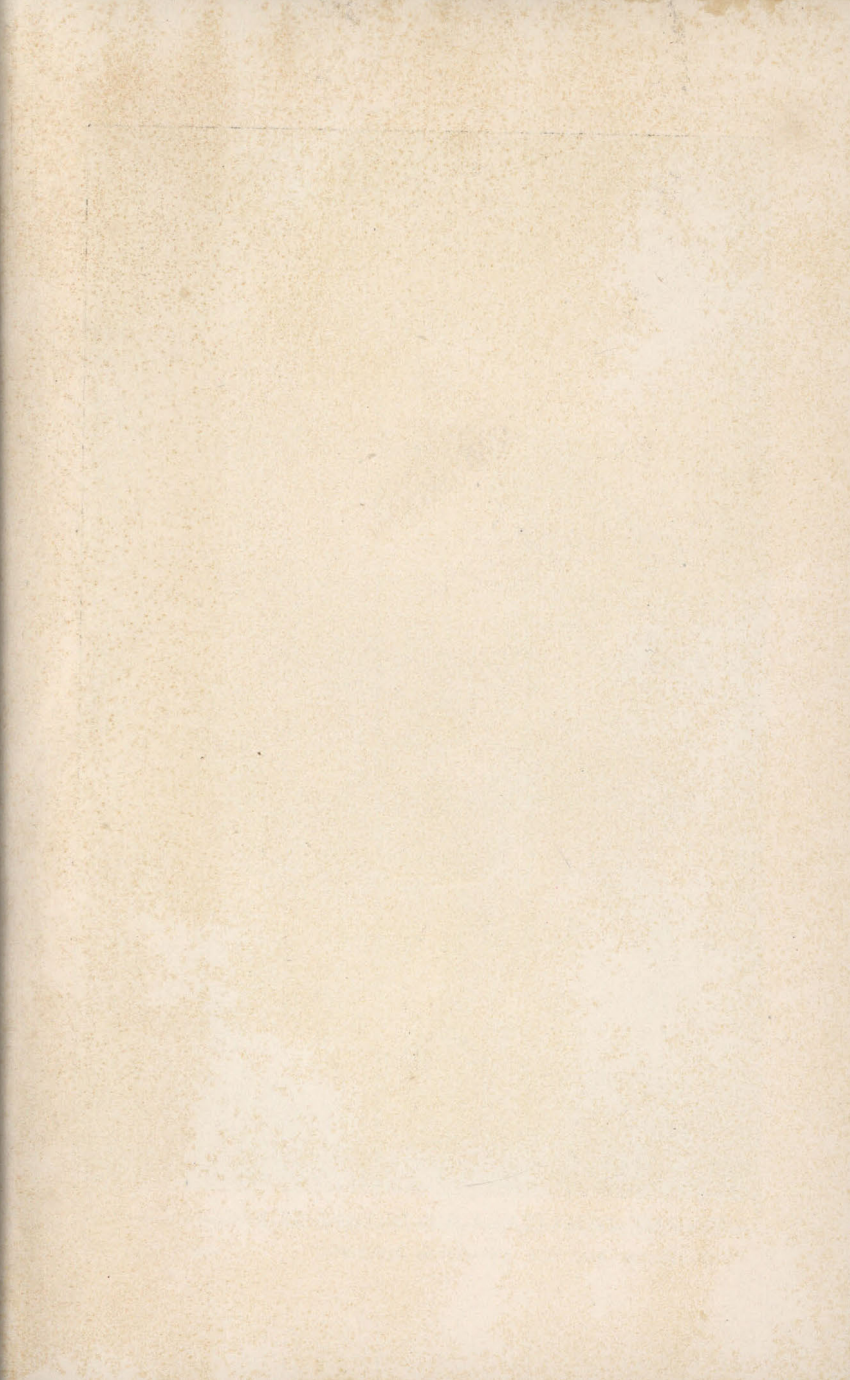
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(See page 187)

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BOB DEXTER AND THE AEROPLANE MYSTERY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE . . .	1
II. THE GOLDEN ROBE	12
III. DOWN INTO DARKNESS	21
IV. THE IRON CHEST	32
V. THE RED BAG	42
VI. FLYING BUTTONS	54
VII. THE TREASURE BOX	60
VIII. THE TERRIBLE WIND	67
IX. A CHASE IN THE DARK	77
X. CAPTURED	86
XI. MYSTERIOUS PRISONERS	95
XII. THE CHINESE GIANT	103
XIII. THE ESCAPE	110
XIV. ABOARD THE ARK	118
XV. IN THE JUNGLE	126
XVI. GILLY MUZZLEWIG	136
XVII. OUT OF THE CLOUDS	142
XVIII. GETTING A CLUE	150

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIX. A STARTLING DISCLOSURE	158
XX. PURSUED AGAIN	168
XXI. DOWN IN A HOLE	177
XXII. RIVAL TONGS	183
XXIII. GNARLED ROOTS	190
XXIV. THE JINT SAN	195
XXV. END OF THE MYSTERY	200

BOB DEXTER AND THE AEROPLANE MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

"WELL, Bob," remarked Ned Fuller as he pulled a purple grape from a bunch in his hand, swallowed the sweet pulp and blew the skin, like a little balloon into the air, "I don't see anything very exciting around here."

"And one week of our vacation is gone," added Harry Pierce, tossing aside the stem of another bunch of grapes, having finished the last one. "There's about as much use for a detective up here as there is for a cop at a Sunday school picnic."

"There isn't even a cat missing!" added Ned.

"I'll say there isn't, by the way they howled under my window last night," chuckled Harry.

Bob Dexter, the third member of the trio, de-

scending from Gib Tolliver's grape patch on the hill began to whistle.

"He hasn't any come-back," said Harry.

"Maybe he's eaten too many grapes," went on Ned. "And yet when he talked us into coming up to Greenwood Lake for our vacations he said he had a hunch something would happen."

"It's got to get a move on, then," said Harry. "Or else our young detective won't have a mystery to solve."

Bob, having finished whistling one verse of a popular song, sat on a flat rock in the shade of a clump of trees, looked down over the valley below them, in which nestled the little farming community of Midvale and remarked:

"When you fellows get through your raspberry picking maybe I'll have something to say."

He spoke in a quiet voice but his two chums had come to associate that with a prelude to something happening. And now Ned exclaimed:

"What's up, Bob?"

"Have you discovered the body?" asked Harry in what he meant for a hoarse whisper but which rather lost its effect from the fact that he could not restrain a chuckle.

"Not yet," and Bob was good-natured over the mild fun being poked at him. "But it may be there."

"Where?" cried both his chums at once.

"In the cave." Bob was still calm and started another whistling air.

"What cave?"

There was no doubt, now, about Ned and Harry being excited.

"Oh, it wouldn't interest you fellows, I suppose," spoke Bob nonchalantly. "Why bother about it?"

"Look here, you——" began Ned.

But Harry, believing in more vigorous measures, playfully sprang to Bob's side, caught him by his hair, bent his head back and raised a threatening fist.

"Your secret cave or a busted nose!" he exclaimed, playfully dramatic.

"Oh, well, if you really want to know I'll tell you," Bob said. "But let go, you chump! You're pulling like the deuce!"

"You've got too much hair, anyhow," chuckled Harry as he took his seat on the rock beside his chum, and Ned, finding another place, ate the last of his bunch of grapes and remarked:

"Step on it!"

"Well," went on Bob, as he idly picked up a handful of pebbles and began tossing them at a stump not far away, "I've discovered a cave down there in the valley and it appears, from the casual look I had of it, that it might be worth investigating."

"How'd you come to find it?" asked Ned.

"And how do you mean you discovered it?" inquired Harry. "Hasn't it been there all the while?"

"As far as I know, yes," assented Bob. "But evidently no one else around here knows about it or we'd have heard of it during the week we've been here. Neither of you ever heard Gib speak of it; did you?"

"I didn't," said Harry.

"Nor I," admitted Ned.

"And yet I heard you fellows asking him, more than once, whether there wasn't something around here that was worth seeing," went on Bob. "Haven't you?"

"Sure!" said Harry.

"And aside from the fish to be had in Greenwood Lake, when they want to bite, he couldn't think of a thing," Ned admitted.

"Which proves," declared Bob, rather dogmatically, "that he doesn't know about this cave."

"Or else he doesn't want you and us to know about it," said Harry.

"What do you mean?" asked Bob, quickly.

"Ah, that brings his detective instincts to the front!" murmured Harry. "Why, I mean that if there is a cave around here, and you have discovered it, and it's been here a long time and Gib

hasn't spoken of it, there are only two theories that will hold. Either he doesn't know about it or he wants to keep it a secret."

"I don't see why he would want to do that," stated Bob and it was evident that he was thinking deeply.

"Maybe it's a new cave, fresh from the oven," spoke Ned.

"Caves aren't made over night," declared Bob. "No, I'm inclined to think neither Gib nor anyone else in Midvale knows about it. So it's up to us to look into it and publish the discovery—that is if it amounts to anything."

"Oh, then you don't know whether it's a big cave or a little one?" asked Ned.

"Not yet," said Bob. "I only found it yesterday and I thought you fellows would like to go into it with me. It might amount to something and again it might not."

"Well," said Ned, getting up to see what was rustling in the thick grass and bushes, and rather hoping it was a snake, for he had an uncanny delight in watching reptiles. "Well, if you have your usual luck, Bob, it will amount to something and may give you a detective mystery to solve."

"Like the time he met old Hiram Beegle with that box and got onto the trail of the pirate's treasure," added Harry.

"Sure!" said Ned.

"Oh, I don't imagine this will be anything much," spoke Bob, with an assumption of indifference. "Only, if it's a big cave, there may be crystals, or stalactites or stalagmites——"

"Or what have you!" interrupted Harry with a chuckle.

"Cut it out and stop the razzing," suggested Ned. "I'd like to see this hole in the ground."

"I'm as serious as a parson," declared Harry. "Go on, Bob."

"Well, if you fellows really want to take a chance, we'll go down in it," went on Bob.

"Is it big enough for all three of us to get into?" asked Ned in surprise.

"I think so."

"Then it's queer nobody around here knows of it."

"Yes, that is the queer part of it," Bob admitted. "But the entrance is pretty well concealed. I only discovered it by accident when I was pulling up a small sassafras tree I wanted to make a fishing pole of. That loosened some dirt and stones around the edge of a big rock, and I saw a hole that may go all the way to China for anything I can tell."

"Hot dog!" ejaculated Bob.

"Let's go!" echoed Harry.

The three young men, who had come to the little country town of Midvale, on the shores of

Greenwood Lake, to spend their summer vacations, going to live at the spacious farmhouse of Gib Tolliver, who "took in boarders," now left the pleasant shade of their rocky seat, half way down from the farmer's vineyard. This they were privileged to visit as often as they pleased and "eat as many grapes as ye kin holt," as Gib expressed it.

"How far is it from here?" asked Ned, who, being the fattest member of the trio, was rather disinclined to walk.

"Not far," said Bob.

"Want us to carry you?" chuckled Harry.

"Speak for yourself!" exclaimed Bob. "I'm not going to carry that lummo!"

"Who asked you to, kid?" Ned began to wax indignant.

"Well, I didn't want you to have any false hopes," chuckled Bob. "Anyhow it isn't far. Just down the valley a ways, over near Gib's sweet corn patch."

"And if the cave doesn't pan out," added Ned, "maybe we can get some roasting ears and——"

"Eat 'em! Isn't that what you were going to say?" broke in Harry.

"What else would you do with roasting ears?" sneered the stout youth. "Want to keep 'em for souvenirs?"

"No, I'm as fond of 'em as you are," admitted

Harry. "How about it, Bob? Or say, maybe we could camp out in that cave and have a roast corn feed. That would be something to do!"

"I don't really know anything about the cave," Bob admitted. "It may be big or it may be little. It may be possible to build a fire in it and not be smothered by smoke. I don't know. What I thought you fellows might like to do would be to explore it with me."

"Surest thing you know!" cried Ned. "I'm getting about fed up on this quiet country life."

"It was all right for a while," agreed Harry. "But we've met all the pretty girls they are and I'm not as fond of fishing as some are. I crave a little excitement."

"Maybe you'll get it if this cave of Bob's pans out anything like some of his other stunts," chuckled Ned. "Anyhow let's go."

The three youths slowly descended the hill back of the Tolliver farmhouse toward the valley in which Midvale was situated. It was a pleasant day in late summer. The air was clear and the sky was blue. It was perfect vacation weather.

Suddenly, as the three walked along Ned exclaimed:

"Hark!"

"Only an aeroplane," remarked Harry.

"Up there!" Bob pointed to a speck in the sky.

"You've got good eyes to spot it so soon," remarked Harry.

"Detective eyes!" chuckled Ned. "But I see it now."

The plane, evidently a small but speedy one, soon loomed large enough for all three of them to observe it. And as it came nearer and began to bank Bob exclaimed:

"He's going to land!"

"And right down there in the valley!" cried Ned.

"Looks as if he was in trouble!" added Harry.

"Maybe there isn't room for him to land," observed Ned.

"Yes, there's a big, level field," came from Bob. "It's down near there where I found the cave entrance. He surely is going to land!"

The small plane came down in a graceful sweep, its motor now cut off, and a moment later it was out of sight behind some trees.

"Come on!" cried Ned, starting to run. "Maybe he crashed!"

"This beats finding a cave!" exclaimed Harry.

Bob, pausing only to mark the spot where the plane had descended, hurried after his chums. As they reached the road they saw several others of the farming community hastening toward the impromptu landing field.

But when, after a rather long and winding run,

the three lads reached, ahead of other curious ones, the spot where they thought the craft of the air had landed, there was no sign of any plane.

"This is queer!" exclaimed Ned.

"I should say so!" came from Harry. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

For answer Bob Dexter pointed to marks in the soft ground—marks of landing wheels and a line where the tail skid had dragged.

"But where'd it go?" cried Ned.

"It must have crashed, bounced up in the air and landed farther off in some bushes around here," suggested Harry.

"Let's have a look!" came from Bob.

But when they had circled around, aided in the frantic search by several farmers, hired men and boys, not a trace of the plane could be found. There were the marks of landing but no more.

"Talk about your mysterious disappearances," murmured Harry, "this has them all beat to a frazzle!"

"It's like the trick of a stage magician!" added Ned. "Say, Bob, did we really see that plane come down?"

"I don't know what you fellows saw, but I'm sure there was a plane."

"Then where is it now?" demanded Harry.

"That's what I've got to find out," said Bob in a low voice to his chums. "Come on over this

way," he added, leading them away from the crowd that was gathering. "I want to show you the cave without letting these others in on the secret. And then we can talk about this disappearing plane."

"Maybe," suggested Harry in a low voice, "there's as big a mystery here as there was at Beacon Beach!"

CHAPTER II

THE GOLDEN ROBE

LEADING his two chums to a secluded place in a little thicket of trees, not far from where the aeroplane had landed and then so mysteriously vanished, Bob Dexter motioned them to maintain silence.

"Until this crowd gets away," he suggested.

"Maybe they won't go until they find the plane," remarked Ned.

"They'll never find that machine," came from Harry. "What I think happened is that he just landed, and then took off again, zooming up over the trees."

"We'd have seen him if he did that," commented Ned.

"Yes," agreed Bob. "I don't see how the pilot could pull a stunt like that in plain view. He surely landed. All the clues point to that. But he's gone."

"Maybe he plunged on through to China!" chuckled Harry.

"Or went down in Bob's cave," added the other youth.

"The cave is around here, that's true enough," Bob admitted. "But the entrance isn't big enough to get even that small areoplane down. I'm inclined to think he took off, though how he could do it without any of us seeing him is beyond me."

"He might have done it when we were down in the hollow, coming here," suggested Harry. "For a short time we didn't have a clear view."

"That's right," spoke Ned. "But what about this cave of yours, Bob? I'm anxious to see it. Then we can make a search for this pilot and his plane. It isn't possible he crashed and burned up everything!"

"No," and Bob Dexter shook his head. "But wait a little while—I think this bunch is going soon. They evidently think the plane took off. And when all's clear I'll take you to the cave."

The three chums sat in the little thicket waiting and this will be the best opportunity to acquaint new readers with the main characters in this story and to let them know why Bob Dexter was called a "detective" by his friends.

As a matter of fact Bob was an amateur detective of no small abilities. Those of you who read the first volume of this series, called "Bob Dexter and the Club House Mystery," will agree to that statement, I think.

Bob lived in the town of Cliffside. His father and mother being dead, Bob was brought up by his

uncle Joel Dexter, a rather harsh man who believed in hard work and plenty of it for boys. But in spite of helping his uncle in the latter's general store, Bob found time to read many detective stories and his great ambition was to become what his chums, Harry and Ned, called a "sleuth." And, really, Bob had solved some rather puzzling local mysteries.

In the book "Bob Dexter and the Beacon Beach Mystery," the young detective added to his laurels, and in the volume immediately preceding this, called "Bob Dexter and the Storm Mountain Mystery," he was the means of getting at the bottom of some strange happenings.

Bob fell in with a peculiar character named Hiram Beegle who had a strange hiding place on Storm Mountain. And when Hiram claimed a certain mysterious box, willed to him by a former shipmate named Hank Denby, trouble began for the aged hermit.

He was attacked in his hut and found wounded, with his door locked on the inside and the key on the floor beside him, the only other entrance to the chamber being down a chimney so constructed as to prevent even a small animal using it.

But Bob solved the key mystery, found the map of the pirate treasure, after taking a wooden leg off of Jolly Bill Hickey, and discovered why a certain Italian wanted to raise monkey nuts.

This achievement, of course, gave Bob more than a local reputation and it was suggested that, when he grew a little older he might join the detective force of some big city. But Bob was in no hurry.

And then summer had come, and as he found his two chums could take their vacations at the same time as he had his, Bob proposed that they go to the quiet little village of Midvale on Greenwood Lake. And here they now are.

Scarcely a week had passed and it seemed as if Bob Dexter was to have another mystery to solve, if he cared to undertake it. For it must be admitted that when an aeroplane comes down in plain sight with a bright sun shining, and no trace of it can be found on the landing field, with the additional proviso that no one saw it take off—then it must be clear that there is a mystery of a sort.

"But I'm more interested in this cave," said Ned when, as he looked from the thicket where he and the others were concealed, he noticed the crowd leaving.

"Maybe that's disappeared, too, like the aeroplane," suggested Harry, with a chuckle.

"Be yourself!" recommended Bob. "I'll show you the cave, fast enough. Or at least a big hole in the ground and I'm pretty sure there's a cave opening out of it. I guess we can go now."

He led his chums from the thicket across a little glade and to another clump of trees. It was in a waste section of land, never having been cultivated, it was evident, and out of sight from the road. Filled with a curiosity they did not endeavor to hide, Ned and Harry followed Bob until he came to the edge of a great rock which upheaved itself from the earth as if pushed by a giant's hand. Around it grew clumps of sassafras and scrub oak, with scattering weeds.

Leaning over, Bob pulled aside some brush and, to the surprised gaze of his chums, disclosed a hole big enough to permit the passage of even fat Ned Fuller.

"Why!" exclaimed Harry as he looked and looked again. "Somebody has been down in that hole!" He pointed to freshly disturbed earth and stones around the opening.

"Sure!" assented Bob.

"Maybe it was the pilot from the areoplane!" suggested Harry.

"Well if he pulled his machine in after him he did something, I'll tell the cock-eyed world!" ejaculated Ned.

"I never thought of that!" murmured Bob.

"What?" came from his two chums.

"That the pilot might have found this cave. But I don't believe he did. I disturbed that dirt and those stones myself."

"You did? When?"

"Yesterday when I was down in the cave. That's when I discovered it but I didn't have a flashlight with me and I think the place is so big we'll have to spend a day or so in it—take our grub and maybe camp over night."

"Hot dog, what a lark!" cried Ned.

"That's because he thinks he's going to get something to eat!" chuckled Harry.

"Oh, cut it out!" snapped his stout chum. "But were you really down there, Bob?"

"Sure! I'm ready to go down again if you fellows are."

For a moment the prospect of a daring adventure seemed to attract both Ned and Harry, but the latter interposed a word of caution as he said:

"I think we'd better think a little more about this. How far did you go into that hole, or cave, Bob?"

"Not very far."

"Then you don't know where it leads, how big it is or anything about it?"

"No, I can't say I do."

"Well, then let's plan this a little better. Let's keep quiet about it for a while. As Bob says, I don't believe this cave is generally known in Midvale or we'd have heard about it in the week we have been here. We may put this town on the map, fellows, by the discovery of some ancient

Indian burial cave with relics and all that!" Harry's eyes were shining with eagerness.

"It may be," admitted Bob. "Anyhow I'm willing to wait a while. But what for, Harry?"

"So we can get flashlights, ropes and things, for we may get into a deep hole and——"

"Eats!" added Ned.

"Yes, eats," agreed Harry. "I'm willing to spend a day in that cavern if it's big enough."

"All right," Bob Dexter assented. "We'll put this bush back and get things together for a tour of exploration tomorrow. We can start in the morning and stay all day."

"With grub!" added Ned, seriously.

"With grub," assented Bob and Harry laughing.

"But I'd like to know more about that aeroplane," said Bob as they came away from the little thicket.

"It sure came down and went up like a stage trick," agreed Ned. "But let's explore the cave, first. The aeroplane will keep."

"Especially as it doesn't seem to be anywhere around here to let itself be investigated," added Harry.

As they walked along back toward the farmhouse where they boarded, Bob looked up and announced:

"About noon. Time to eat!"

"How do you know?" asked Harry.

"Look at the sun," answered Bob, pointing to the blazing orb, now almost directly overhead. "But if it weren't for that I could tell it was time for the noon grub by looking at Ned's face."

"What's the matter with my face?" came from the stout lad who was panting along after the others.

"It wants feeding, that's all!" chuckled Bob. "Oh, no offense!" he quickly added as he saw Ned looking at a clod of earth as if ready to heave it. "We're all going to eat."

"There goes Uncle Tom," remarked Harry, indicating the brother of Gib Tolliver who was affectionately known as "Uncle". He was a much more genial soul than his harder-fisted and more grasping brother.

"Why Uncle Tom wants to stay on this place and work for Gib, who treats him like a hired man, is more than I can understand," said Bob.

"And Tom owns half the farm, so I've heard said," commented Ned.

"You wouldn't think it the way Gib orders him about," said Harry. "Well, it takes all kinds to make a world. Anyhow I hope, with Ned, that they've got something good for lunch."

"I'm with you," agreed Bob.

As they entered the farmhouse yard they could look up the hill back of it, toward the vineyard

they had left a little while before. And, gazing up this hill, Bob Dexter saw something which caused him to grasp his chums by their arms and exclaim:

"Look!"

"What is it?" asked Ned.

"A man in a golden robe," murmured Harry.

"Yellow, at any rate," assented Bob. "And say—can't you see—he's a Chink—a Chinese!"

"By golly you're right!" gasped Harry.

"It a Chinese!" added Ned.

"And Gib Tolliver is with him!" said Bob in a low voice. "Fellows, there's something queer going on around here!"

CHAPTER III

DOWN INTO DARKNESS

SURPRISE so held spell-bound the three lads that, for a few moments after witnessing the odd sight, they did nothing. They stood looking up at the distant hillside watching the Chinese in his brilliant, yellow robe and the crabbed, old farmer in his dark, blue overalls.

"Gib is talking to the Chink as if he was a long-lost brother," commented Ned.

"Wonder where he came from?" spoke Bob.

"Maybe he dropped out of that aeroplane!" suggested Ned.

"Can it!" advised Harry. "It must be Soy Ting, the Midvale laundryman, dolled up for a Hallowe'en party.

"No," said Bob, quietly. Already he was using his keen powers of observation and deduction. "Garments like those aren't worn by Chink laundrymen. All Soy Ting ever has are those dark blue pants of his and an oilcloth shirt parked outside."

"But Soy might have some glad rags stowed away in a chest of Lotus Flower tea," suggested

Ned, "or hidden behind some secret panel where he keeps his opium pipe that he must puff on when he wants to dream he is in the Garden of Ten Thousand Smiles."

Bob shook his head. His active brain was beginning to work, and he was wondering if the appearance and disappearance of the plane, the discovery of the cave and the visit of the Chinese in the golden robe might not be connected. It was a detective mystery worthy of the solution of even a more experienced sleuth than himself.

Suddenly, as the boys watched, they saw Gib Tolliver and the Oriental disappear. It was as though they had been observing a scene on a distant theatre stage and a modern magician had, in some unknown way, caused the two figures to vanish.

"Where'd they go to?" cried Ned.

"It's like that aeroplane!" added Harry. "We'd better look out or we'll be vanishing into thin air."

"That's easily explained," said Bob with a smile.

"How?" asked Harry.

"Where'd they go?" Ned wanted to know.

"Into the spring house on the side of the hill," stated the young detective, thus shattering that much of the mystery, at least.

"That's right!" echoed Ned. "I forgot about

the spring house being right there. But what's Gib taking the Chink inside for?"

"To get a drink of water—what else?" questioned Bob. He really did not believe this himself, but he was not quite ready with a theory that suited him and he passed this on for what it was worth.

"Oh, sure!" exclaimed Harry. "No use trying to make a mystery out of something perfectly plain."

"Say, I've got a line on this!" declared Ned.

"Spill it!" advised Harry.

"This Chink in the yellow robe is a friend or a cousin, maybe, of Soy Ting the Midvale laundryman. Maybe this new one thinks of buying Gib's farm, and Gib is just showing him the natural curiosities. The Chinese are great on gardening, you know."

"So I've heard," admitted Bob. "Well, if that's all it is we might as well go eat."

"The most sensible words I've heard today!" commented Ned. "Step on it!"

The boys hurried on to the farmhouse where they boarded and were greeted by the amply-proportioned Mrs. Tolliver whom they had fallen into the habit of calling "Ma," for she surely mothered them in the matter of looking after their beds and food.

"Isn't Mr. Tolliver coming to dinner?" asked

Ned as he began to dispose of his generously heaped plate.

"A little later," his wife answered, and the boys fancied there was a worried look in her eyes. "He had to take —er—a man," she hesitated over the word, "up to the vineyard."

"Yes, we saw him up there," spoke Harry. "It was a Chinaman in a yellow silk nightgown."

"Nightgown!" exclaimed Ma Tolliver, almost dropping the bread plate. "Why—how——"

"It was just a regulation Oriental robe," exclaimed Bob. "I've often seen Chinese wear clothes just like that in the theatre. But why this one put it on out here I can't guess."

"Nor I," said Mrs. Tolliver. "When he came here with Soy Ting he was dressed the same as anyone else, I mean that strange Chinaman was. He must have changed his clothes on the way up the hill."

"That would be queer," murmured Ned.

"What's all this talk about a Chinaman?" demanded Uncle Tom Tolliver, coming in from where he had been putting Paris green on the potato vines. He caught the tag-end of the conversation.

"I don't know what it means," Ma Tolliver admitted, her voice showing worryment. "But a little while ago Soy Ting came here and brought a strange Chinaman with him. Soy seemed to ex-

pect to meet Gib here, as near as I could understand his gibberish, so I blew the conch horn and called him in from where he was 'tending to the bees. Gib didn't seem at all surprised, like I thought he'd be. He took it all as a matter of fact and after Soy and the new Chinaman had talked a little in their sing-song way, Soy went back to his laundry and Gib and the new one went on up to the grape patch. But I didn't see anything of a yellow robe."

"What do you mean—yellow robe?" asked Uncle Tom in surprise.

The boys told what they had seen, saying nothing about the cave or the disappearing aeroplane. There would be time enough for those elements of the mystery later.

"You must be dreaming!" chuckled the portly brother of Gib Tolliver. "I don't know in the least what it's all about, but my guess is that this new Chinaman keeps a store over Chester way, maybe, and he want's to bargain for some of our grapes. It must have been the sunshine that made you think he wore a yellow robe. Pass the potatoes, Ma!"

"It was a yellow robe all right," affirmed Harry.

"Did he come in an automobile—I mean the strange Chinese?" asked Bob.

"Not that I saw," answered Ma. "Why?"

"Well, if he had," Bob went on, "he might have been wearing a sort of long coat—like a linen duster—and that might have seemed yellow to us in the sunlight."

"I didn't see any duster or auto, either," Mrs. Tolliver said. "But if you boys saw a yellow robe maybe it's for religion."

"What religion—whose?" asked Ned, wonderingly.

"That Chinaman's—if he has a religion. Same as some clergymen wear, you know, only theirs is black; their uniforms, I mean."

"Well, I wouldn't bother about it if I was you," said Uncle Tom in his easy, tolerant way. "Gib will probably tell us all about it when he comes down off the grape hill. Pass the bread, Ma!"

So the eating and talk went on, but Gib Tolliver did not appear and the meal was almost over, Uncle Tom leaving before the boys to go back to his potato patch, when a neighbor ran in to say that her mother was "took bad," and would Ma Tolliver come over with some aromatic spirits of ammonia.

"Of course! I'll be right over!" said the sympathetic farmer's wife. "Gib can fend for himself when he comes down off the hill. You boys had enough?" she asked, solicitously.

"Oh, yes," answered Ned. "Thanks!"

"How come?" gasped Harry. "First time I ever heard you say that, Ned!"

"Oh, shut up!" recommended his stout chum.

But as Ma Tolliver hurried away and as they were thus left alone in the farmhouse, for the "hired girl" had also gone with Mrs. Tolliver to the neighbor's, Bob suddenly exclaimed:

"Fellows, this is our chance!"

"For what?" asked Harry.

"For packing up some grub, getting ropes and our flashlights, and seeing what's in that cave of mine! Ma Tolliver won't mind if we take some things to eat. We're paying our board and if we don't come home to supper it will work out even. I thought maybe we'd find the cave big enough to stay several hours."

"Let's go!" chanted Harry. "It will be something to help pass the time, anyhow. And if the cave doesn't pan out we can eat the grub in the woods."

"Lay in a good supply," suggested Ned. "I'll get a basket."

They soon had a goodly supply of food packed in a large basket, with several coils of light but strong rope and then, each one having taken his flashlight, they hurried out of the farmhouse before Gib could come down from the vineyard or his wife return from her errand of mercy.

They looked up the hill, as they turned down into the valley where lay the entrance to the cave, but they saw no sign of Gib Tolliver or the yellow-robed Chinese.

"They must be drinking that spring dry," observed Ned.

"No, they're out of there—the door is closed," said Bob.

"You've got good eyesight," complimented Harry, and it was a fact. Vision was one of the young detective's accomplishments, or, rather, gifts.

The boys hurried to the thicket where, a short time before, Bob had showed them his strange discovery. On the way they passed the little clearing where the aeroplane had so mysteriously vanished from, but there was no sign of the machine or its occupants.

"Now, fellows, get ready to follow me," advised Bob as he pulled aside the bushes and again revealed the cave opening. He slid into it feet first, hanging to the edges of rock with his hands. Soon only his head was visible.

"Do you know what you're doing?" asked Ned, anxiously.

"Sure, I went in this way yesterday."

"I know, but you don't know how big a drop there may be in there."

"Yes, it's about seven feet, that leaves about a

foot and a half for me to fall after I let go up here. Hand me down the basket of grub when I sing out for it. Come on, Ned."

"Let Harry go first. I'm kind-hearted that way."

"After you, my dear!" chanted Harry.

"Oh, there's no danger!" exclaimed Bob. "Look at me!"

He unclasped his fingers from the rocky edge of the entrance and disappeared in the darkness. His chums heard a dull thud as his feet struck and the next moment his voice floated up to them:

"Hand down the grub and come on! Draw lots if you're afraid."

This stiffened the courage of the two outside and in another moment Ned had handed down the basket to Bob and had followed him into the hole, dropping down on a sort of ledge about, as Bob had said, seven feet below the outside opening.

Then Harry went down and soon the three were standing on what seemed to be a shelf of rock in a dark cave, the only light there was coming from the opening over their heads.

"Dark as tar!" commented Ned, looking down.

"Is this all there is to it?" Harry wanted to know.

"I hope there's more," Bob said. "Wait until I get my light going."

There was a moment's pause and then Ned felt

himself being pulled to one side. He had a sense of being in a much larger hole or cavern than he had anticipated. Then came a gleam of brilliant illumination as Bob switched on his pocket torch.

Ned and Harry looked around them and saw, somewhat dimly, however, that they were in a natural rock cave, hollowed out beneath the great shelf of stone above their heads—the stone under one edge of which they had slid to get down the hole.

“How far does it go?” asked Ned, and his voice echoed eerily in that strange cavern.

“Haven’t had time to find out yet,” Bob answered. “We’ll take a look now. Mind your steps!”

He moved off to the left, followed, though cautiously and rather timidly, by Ned and Harry. The light from the electric torch gleamed unevenly on the floor of dirt and rock.

Suddenly Ned gave a start, called out in a half-smothered voice and made a grab for Harry’s arm.

“I’m falling!” Ned exclaimed.

He knocked Harry off his balance and the latter, to save himself, reached for Bob.

“Go easy!” cried the young detective.

His right hand shot out into the darkness to grasp something but his fingers closed only on thin air. Then the flashlight went out and the

three boys felt themselves falling down into a pitch-black darkness that was wrapped about them like some sombre blanket of the night.

CHAPTER IV

THE IRON CHEST

PROBABLY because he was the last to fall, and had the advantage of landing on the cushion formed by Ned and Harry under him, Bob Dexter was the first to recover his senses. How long he had remained unconscious from the shock of his tumble he did not then know. But he moved about, flexed his arms and legs to determine that none of them was broken, and then felt of his head rather gingerly.

"All here, but not exactly rightside up!" murmured the young detective as he stared about him in the blackness. "Wonder how the others are? Ned! Harry!" he called, feeling about with his hands. His fingers came in contact with something hairy and for a moment he thought he had touched a wild animal. He uttered an exclamation.

"Quit it!" called the voice of Ned. "What's the idea?"

"I wanted to see if you were alive," Bob answered, a sense of great relief coming over him.

"Well, I am, but I won't be long if you keep whanging my head on the sore spot! Oh, boy,

what a tumble! Where's Harry? Why don't you show a light so we can see where we are?"

"I don't know," Bob answered. "I mean I don't know where Harry is. As for the light, I dropped it. You've got one. Look in your pockets."

"Can't do much looking in darkness like this," murmured Ned. "But I can feel for it." He moved about and soon a welcome gleam of light pierced the blackness of the cave.

"There's Harry!" exclaimed Bob, as a sprawled figure came into the circle of the beams from the electric torch.

"Is he—is he——" faltered Ned, unable to continue.

But his fears and those of Bob vanished as Harry moved, sat up rubbing his head and murmured:

"Is it morning?"

"It might be for all I can tell," answered Ned. "What happened, anyhow, Bob? This is your party you know."

"What happened was that one of you fellows slipped off a ledge, I guess, and carried us all down. We have fallen farther and deeper down into this cave, and it's a wonder we weren't all killed!"

"We may be yet," said Harry, rather gloomily as he stood up and moved about, feeling of him-

self. But he found nothing wrong except bruises and sprains.

"What do you mean we'll all be killed?" asked Bob.

"Well, if we can't get out of this cave of yours we may starve to death."

"Here's the basket of grub," Bob went on, as he picked up his electric torch from the light cast by Ned's, and showed where the culinary department was located. The basket had fallen with the boys, and had tipped over, but all the stuff was there.

"So far so good," murmured Ned. "We may not starve to death right away, but that food won't last long."

"Well, we can go out of this cave whenever we like," Bob stated, "and get more."

"Spoken like a true detective!" chuckled Harry. "But where's your hole for getting out?"

"Why, somewhere around here," Bob answered.

"Is it?" asked Harry in a tone implying disbelief. "Shut off your lamps and see if you can see a glimmer of daylight, which ought to happen if we're any where near the hole we fell in."

Impelled by some unknown fear, Ned and Bob slipped the switches of their little torches, plunging all about them into blackness again. There was not the slightest gleam of daylight coming into the cave.

"Well?" asked Harry, ominously.

"We'll hunt for that hole," suggested Bob. "It can't be a great way back. We didn't fall far or we'd none of us be alive. And look here!" He switched on his light again and showed his chums that the bottom of the cavern into which they had first crawled and then fallen was covered with dried leaves. "They came in through some hole," Bob went on. "And if they blew *in* we can crawl *out*. Come on, we'll look for that hole, unless you want to explore the cave a bit."

"Let's look for the hole first and make sure of getting out, and then do the exploring," suggested Ned and this was voted a good plan. Accordingly the basket of food was repacked, the boys moved about until they felt more limber and then, making sure each one had his torch handy, Bob set off in the lead, planning to walk back, as he thought, until he was under the hole by which they had entered.

First, however, they flashed all three lights over their heads and around them, disclosing that they were in rather a large cavern the extent of which they could not determine, it was so dark.

"What I think," Bob said, "is that the vestibule of the cave, so to speak, is small. That's the part I found first. We got in on some ledge, but stepped off that into the larger part of the cave and rolled down a steep hill to the place where we got our

senses back. So the logical thing to do is to walk up hill until we get under the hole we came in by."

"Again the detective speaks!" declaimed Harry in an assumed theatrical tone which showed he still had his sense of humor.

"Bob is right at that," declared Ned. "So let's hit the trail!"

"Don't forget the basket," Bob warned Harry as the young sleuth started off up the slope of the cave, for there was a distinct incline here.

"I'll see that he doesn't!" spoke Ned. "I'm getting hungry already. Watch your step, Harry."

As they walked they found they were proceeding along a winding tunnel, hewed out of solid rock, about eight or ten feet in width and how high they could not judge, for the gleams of the light Bob carried did not reach to the roof. The floor was a mixture of earth, dried leaves, small sticks, pebbles and other debris which caused Bob to say:

"This was once an underground stream."

"I believe you're right," agreed Harry.

"I've heard Gib Tolliver say there was something of that sort around here," added Ned. "But he didn't seem to know where it was. And I'll bet neither he nor Uncle Tom know it's under their own farm."

"Likely not," assented Bob.

They walked along in wondering silence that they had discovered such a large cave, or tunnel, and could only speculate on where it extended. And finally Harry remarked:

"We don't seem to be coming to that hole very fast, Bob."

"No, we don't," Bob admitted and his voice was puzzled. "Wait until I douse the glim a second and see if you can spot any daylight."

The shutting off of the electric torch left them in such dense blackness that it could "almost be felt," as Ned remarked. And there was no gleam of natural light anywhere around them to indicate an entrance to the cave or tunnel.

"Nothing doing!" remarked Ned in rather worried tones.

"I think what we've done," Bob said, "is to come the wrong way."

"Wrong way?" cried Harry. "What do you mean?"

"Instead of walking back *toward* the hole we came in, we have walked *away* from it."

"But you said it would be uphill!" challenged Ned.

"I know I did, but you see there are two hills. That hole was in the lowest part of the valley, or very near it. We fell and rolled to the place where the two downward sloping sides of this tun-

nel meet. Instead of walking back up the slope toward Tolliver's house, we have walked away from it."

"Then we've got to go back," suggested Ned.

"Sure!" Bob assented.

"I don't agree with you," came from Harry. "Let's keep on the way we are going. There may be another way of getting into or out of this cave or tunnel of yours, Bob. Anyhow, let's go as far as we can this way and see what's at the end. We can then turn around and come back this way and go to the other end. We're in no hurry and we have grub. Let's keep on, I say."

"Well, maybe it's a good idea," agreed Bob.

"I'm willing," assented Ned.

So instead of turning about they kept on going up the slope which resembled the dry bed of some stream. For several minutes they walked along, their footsteps echoing eerily and the torch in Bob's hand casting grotesque, black shadows on the rocky walls. Then, suddenly, Bob exclaimed:

"Here it is!"

"What?" chorused his chums.

"The hole we fell in. Look, there's daylight gleaming!"

Bob shut off his torch and before the three boys was, surely, a gleam. But Harry exclaimed:

"That isn't daylight! It's another light—like ours. Some one else is down in this tunnel! May-

be it's Gib or Uncle Tom looking for us. That's artificial light, Bob."

"I believe you're right," agreed the young detective in a low tone. "But no one can be looking for us. No one knows we are here."

"That's so!" murmured Harry.

"Hark!" whispered Ned. "I hear voices!"

They became silent, standing there in the darkness and looking toward the distant gleam of light. It seemed to come through some hole, like a chink in a rock. And there was no doubt as to the voices. There were two of them—one that of a man they all knew.

"It's Gib!" gasped Ned.

"Yes," assented Bob, quietly. "Listen."

To their ears came the voice of the farmer asking:

"Then you'll take it?"

Another voice which they recognized as that peculiar to Chinese, spoke in answer, saying:

"My unworthy and miserable cash will be most deferentially paid by my lowly self for this high delight of your exceedingly gracious excellency!"

Bob uttered a low murmur of surprise, which was cautiously echoed by his chums. He moved forward, followed by them, around a shoulder of stone and now they could all see that the light came through a hole in the rocky wall of the tun-

nel. Beyond that wall was Gib Tolliver and the strange Oriental in the golden yellow robe.

"What's the game?" whispered Ned.

"We'll find out," answered Bob.

Approaching cautiously the hole through which the light gleamed, the boys found themselves looking into another small cave. And they knew it at once as the one containing the cold spring from which the Tolliver house derived its supply of water. The spring bubbled out of a side hill above the vineyard and for sanitation was enclosed by a rough shack of boards, with a door for entrance. This closing in of the spring protected it from wandering horses and cows, and the shack was large enough for two persons to get in. The spring was in the centre of a great rock which formed the floor. The back and most of the sides of the little cave were of rock, the front was composed of the wooden door and frame.

But it was not so much the spring cave, the sight of Gib Tolliver in his working overalls, or the vision of the mysterious Oriental in his robes of yellow silk that impressed the boys as it was the view they had of a small iron chest resting on a ledge of rock at the side of the spring cave. A candle, stuck to a projecting knob of stone by some of the melted paraffine, cast flickering shadows over the strange scene, and caused the iron chest to bulge and shrink in turn like some living,

breathing animal. Bending over the chest, the Chinese plunged into the depths his yellow hands with their long nails. He seemed to be turning over the contents like a miser.

"It must be full of gold!" whispered Ned.

"Or diamonds!" added Harry.

"Hush!" warned Bob.

The next instant they saw the Oriental turn and stare directly at the hole through which they were peering—as though he had heard or seen them.

With a quick motion he slammed down the iron cover of the chest and blew out the candle, plunging the scene into darkness.

CHAPTER V

THE RED BAG

SURPRISE, and not a little fear, held Bob Dexter and his two chums motionless there in the darkness. They had moved back a short distance from the peephole, silently stepping on the felt-like covering of dead leaves scattered over the tunnel floor. Then, after what seemed like a long time, but which, really, was short, the voice of Gib Toller was heard coming through the gloom, asking:

"What'd do you blow out that candle for?"

"Pardon, honorable guardian of the treasure," was the mysterious reply. "But we are being spied upon."

"You mean somebody lookin' at us?"

"Such is my unworthy opinion."

"Bosh!" exclaimed Gib. "There's nobody here in this spring house but you an' me."

"Not here in this cave of the spring, perhaps, but beyond," spoke the Chinese in excellent English though with an odd accent.

"Bosh!" cried Gib again. "There's nothin' beyond this hole in my side hill but solid rock."

"Then I was mistaken," came the smooth rejoinder. "I would not set my poor opinion against that of my honorable friend. But I thought I looked through some hole in the rock and felt the gaze of spying eyes upon us."

"Nonsense!" Gib exclaimed. "There's blow-holes in the rock back here, yes. But they're only cracks. There's nothing back of this spring cave."

"We shall see—later," went on the Chinese. "Then I shall light the candle again."

"Do," urged Gib. "I don't like it here in the dark." It was not exactly all dark, for some light filtered in around the cracks in the door. And a moment later the boys saw the gleam of the candle through the peep hole, which they dared not approach too closely for fear of revealing themselves to the sharp eyes and ears of the strange Chinese. They had withdrawn a little farther distance away and stood in the strange, dark tunnel.

"We'd better not take any more chances trying to see or hear what's going on in there," suggested Bob, in a whisper.

"But I'd like to get at the bottom of the mystery," spoke Ned.

"So would I, and that's what I'm going to do!" declared the young detective earnestly. "And I'm also going to find out what became of that aeroplane. But this isn't the time to do it."

"What's your plan?" Harry wanted to know.

"We'll strike back along the tunnel," proposed Bob, "and try to locate the place we fell in. That ought to be easy. After that——"

"Let's eat!" proposed Ned, earnestly though in a whisper.

"A good idea!" agreed Bob. "It will help us to think better."

"Must be close to what Uncle Tom calls supper time," went on Harry.

"It is—six o'clock," announced Bob, looking at his watch in the light of his torch, which he did not switch on, however, until they were farther down the tunnel behind a shoulder of projecting rock. The timepiece had not stopped when Bob fell.

"Six o'clock!" echoed Ned. "No wonder I'm hungry!"

They had brought the basket of food with them and now, retreating to a place where the tunnel widened out into something more like a cave, and where there was a little, trickling spring of water, they sat down, set one small electric light aglow and ate heartily, if under strange circumstances.

"What I'd like to know," mumbled Harry, chewing his food, "is what that mysterious Chink is doing with Gib?"

"And what I'd like to know," said Ned, "is what was in that iron chest? Could it have been gold or diamonds?"

"We'll find out," declared Bob and from what his chums knew of him in the past they had faith that he would, at least, get a start on solving the mystery. "We'll wait a while," went on Bob, "to give Gib and the Chink time to get out of the spring house cave. Gib is sure to go down to eat, perhaps he's gone before this. Never knew him to stay away from his grub so long. And when the place is clear we'll have a look around it."

"And open the iron chest," suggested Ned.

"If we can," stipulated Harry.

"And if it's there," added Bob.

But after eating and making a cautious return to where they had looked through the rocky barrier, they were disappointed in a way. Not that they saw anyone in the spring cave, for the place was in darkness and no sounds came from it save the gurgle of water.

But the only opening into it from the side of the wall where the boys were now standing was that little peep hole.

"And we can't get through that," said Bob.

"Can't see much of anything, either," added Harry, for they had tried in vain to shine the light of a torch through the little hole. They also tried the rocky partition to see if it would shale off, but it was solid and they could not break through.

"Well," decided Bob, "the best thing we can do is to go back and try to locate the hole where

we fell in. We can then get out and enter the spring cave from in front."

His chums agreed to this and then began what proved to be a wearying search for the hole by which they had entered the cave in the beginning—the place where they fell in. They wandered up and down, and soon discovered that there were several tunnels, or passages, merging and then they realized they must have taken a wrong turn.

"But what are we going to do if we can't get out?" asked Ned when this danger seemed to confront them.

"Oh, we can get out if we have to use our knives and chip a bigger hole into the spring cave," Bob said. "We could do that in time."

"And starve, meanwhile, unless we could shout and make somebody hear us," said Ned, gloomily.

"We've got food enough for another meal—two if we go on short rations," Harry said. "Don't get in a panic."

"I'm not," Ned stated. "But I like to eat!"

"Everybody knows that!" chuckled Harry.

"Anyhow," suggested Bob, trying to make the best of it, "if we do have to stay in here all night that won't make a bad bed." He flashed his light on the soft mass of dried leaves and other debris on the floor of the tunnel. It had evidently been carried in at a flood stage of the now dry river, or underground stream.

"Yes, I've slept on worse beds," agreed Harry, when Ned suddenly called:

"Hark!"

"What's the matter?" demanded Bob.

"Come here!" ordered Ned in a whisper. "And shut off that light!"

His voice was so eager that Bob obeyed at once and was walking toward his chum, as best he could in the darkness, when suddenly the cave seemed filled with a most blood-curdling yell. It echoed and reverberated through the rocky passages in a weird fashion.

"What in the name of Blue Peter is that?" gasped Harry.

"Suffering tomcats!" cried Ned. "That's awful!"

"Must be Gib killing the Chink or the Chink squeezing the wind out of Gib," went on Harry.

Again the weird cry seemed to fill the tunnel and as the echoes of it died away Bob suddenly laughed and said:

"It's only a lynx—a bob-cat. He's howling because he sees the moon I guess."

"I hope he isn't in here!" muttered Harry.

Again came the howl, unmistakably, now, that of some animal.

"It's outside," Bob said. "But it sounds so plain there must be a hole around here and——"

"That's what I called you over to see!" broke

in Ned. "I thought I saw the moon through a hole and I wanted to make sure. Look! Isn't that the moon?"

His chums were close to him in the darkness, peering over his shoulders and a moment later Bob saw above him and a short distance off a yellow light.

"It is the moon!" he said. "It's shining in through a hole."

"If it's a hole!" exclaimed Harry, "then we can get out."

"Maybe it's the one we fell in," commented Ned.

But when Tom had again switched on his torch it was evident that they had discovered another entrance to the tunnel, since the one ahead of and above them was not the one through which they had toppled into the cavern.

"There's an easy, sloping ascent from the bottom of the tunnel up to that hill," Bob said, examining it by his light. "We fell down straight and then rolled."

"Well, can we get out—that's the main question?" asked Harry.

"Sure," Bob agreed. "Come on!"

"What about that lynx?" asked Ned.

"He won't bother us," Bob said. "He just yowled down this hole for fun and probably he's away off now. Come on!"

The three boys managed to climb up the low, sloping passage that led to the opening through which the moon was shining and a little later they stood outside the cave on the side of a hill amid a thicket of trees, bushes and underbrush. So thick was the growth that only a careful search would have revealed an opening down into an extensive series of tunnels and caves. It was not unlike the hole to which Bob had introduced his chums, but it was nearly a mile from it, though still on the land of Gib Tolliver.

"Well, we're out again," observed Harry, breathing deep of the night air.

"And this is a much easier way to get into the cave than by falling," added Bob with a chuckle.

"See anything of that lynx?" Ned wanted to know.

"Oh, forget him," advised Harry. "He's nothing but a big cat with a bobbed tail. What I want to know is the next thing to do."

"Let's go back to our boarding place and go to bed," proposed Ned, yawning.

"Fellows!" suddenly exclaimed Bob as they stood there again in the open after their strange adventure, "I've got something to propose. See what you think of it. I guess we're all agreed that there is a queer mystery here, beginning with the strange disappearance of the aeroplane and continuing with Gib and that Chink having a pow-

wow over a strange iron chest. Now if we go back to the farmhouse we may not get a chance to solve this mystery.

"Why not?" asked Ned, rather sleepily.

"Oh, we'll run into Gib and his folks. There'll be talk, or we'll let out that we've seen some queer doings and that may put them on their guard. Whereas if they don't know that we're on their trail they'll go on as they planned and we can shadow 'em."

"Well, if we don't go back to Gib's house, what then?" asked Harry.

"Let's make the cave our headquarters for a while, now that we know a good way in and out," went on Bob.

"But we've got to eat and sleep," objected Ned.

"I'm coming to that," Bob said. "We can slip down to the house when everybody's asleep, get some of our belongings, snibby a blanket each and some more grub and come back here. It won't be the first time we've sneaked in when we were out late. The family sleeps sound."

"But they'll be sure to miss the things we take, and miss us in the morning," objected Harry. "Then they'll suspect something."

"Let them," Bob said. "We're our own bosses. We've paid our board in advance and if we want to take our meals out in a cave what's that to the Tollivers? Nothing I tell you! And we can leave

a note saying we have taken some of our things because we're going camping, which we are. Then they won't try to find out where we are hiding."

"All right, I'm willing!" assented Harry.

"Count me in as long as you're going to pack some more grub," spoke Ned.

So it was arranged. A little later the boys slipped into the dark and silent house, climbing up to their rooms by means of an old ivy vine and packing in valises some of their belongings. They slept in a distant wing and no one appeared to have been aroused by this entrance after midnight. Nor were they disturbed as they took more food, packing it in a basket. They felt they had a right to this as they had paid board in advance.

They were just clear of the house, having gone out through the kitchen door when, in the darkness they heard footsteps approaching on the gravel drive that was at the side of the place. At the same time they heard voices murmuring.

"Somebody's coming!" whispered Ned.

"I hear 'em," exclaimed Bob, pulling his two chums into the shadow of the old farmhouse. They were near a kitchen window, the shade of which was not all the way down.

A moment later they heard the side door unlocked and the tramp of feet in the kitchen, the sounds coming to them plainly through the win-

dow beneath which they crouched. Then the room was suddenly aglow with light.

Peering in beneath the curtain, Bob and his chums saw Gib Tolliver and the mysterious Chinese, though now that Oriental was not wearing his gorgeous, yellow robe. He had on a dark suit like that worn by Gib. But it was not so much the appearance of Gib and the Chinese in the farmhouse kitchen that amazed the boys, as it was the object the two men carried between them. This was a red bag, showing the marks of mud and water on its burlap sides. And there were on the clothing of the two men the same spots of soil.

"They've been digging up buried treasure!" gasped Ned.

"Look so!" agreed Harry.

"Quiet!" urged Bob, softly. "This mystery is getting deeper, fellows. But we'd better clear out from here for a time, or Gib may spot us. Let's go back to the cave, spend the night there and decide what's best to do. We've got to get to the bottom of this!"

They watched through the window a little longer, but Gib did not open the muddy, red bag and he and the Chinese seemed to be talking in whispers. So, not knowing what moment they might come out and discover them in hiding, and fearful lest Mrs. Tolliver awake and come down to her devastated pantry, the boys hurried away.

They headed back for the thicket where they knew they could easily get into the tunnel and cave again, and about half way there Ned suddenly exclaimed:

"We forgot all about leaving that note."

"Never mind," Bob answered. "Perhaps it's just as well we didn't. Let's mysteriously disappear ourselves. It will be in keeping with all that's going on here. There's a new complication with the bringing in, at midnight, of a queer, red bag."

"Maybe it has the murdered body in," whispered Harry.

"'Twasn't big enough for that," Bob chuckled. "But there's the hole we're going in right ahead," and he pointed to the thicket, now plainly in view by the moonlight. "And we can——"

"Look!" suddenly interrupted Ned.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"There's a man going down that hole—into our cave!" gasped Ned. "See him!"

CHAPTER VI

FLYING BUTTONS

BOB DEXTER and his chums came to an abrupt stop in the moonlight not far from the thicket which concealed the more accessible entrance to the tunnels and caves. Shadows seemed to be moving—shadows of the trees, shadows of the clouds, but, more than this, the shadow of a man—a big and bulky man—who was slowly lurching about in the underbrush, dangerously close to the hole out of which the trio had climbed a short time before.

“Do you see him?” murmured Ned.

“Sure!” answered Bob.

“Tisn’t Gib; is it?” asked Harry.

“Don’t see how it can be. Gib’s back in the house with the Chink.”

“Maybe it’s the Chinese,” suggested Ned.

“Too big for him,” whispered Bob. “And it isn’t Uncle Tom. It’s a man I’ve never seen before.”

The three lads strained their eyes to pierce the gloom, for now the moon was behind some clouds. All they could see was that dark, lurching figure

of a big man. And they feared that, any moment, he might discover the cave entrance if, indeed, he did not already know about it and was heading for it.

Then, as the boys stood half hidden by the edge of the thicket and the shadows of the night, not knowing what to do, speculating whether this might not be some one sent out to look for them, there burst on the silence of darkness a sudden, little popping sound, like a small explosion, followed immediately by a long sigh, as if of relief from strain and stress and a voice murmured:

"By my grommet and cringle—there goes another button. I must take stock and see if I have enough left to get me back to port. But me no buttons! I'll need a new bolt rope soon!"

There was a chuckle such as can come only from the stomach of a fat man. It was followed by another popping sound and a second later there was a rustle in the dried leaves at the feet of the boys. A rustle such as would be caused by something falling near them.

"And yet another!" exclaimed the unknown with more chuckles. "They are going fast! I did not know I could so expand. But I've been hove to long enough. Up anchor and away!" he chanted in a singsong voice.

There was a movement amid the shadows, as if a section of them had shifted and a moment later

the stranger heaved himself up out of a hollow, became a dark mass against a light patch of sky and was more plainly revealed as a big bulk of a man carrying a bundle slung on a stick over his shoulder.

"Avast and belay, I'm on my way!" he chanted.

The boys maintained silence until he was out of hearing and then Ned whispered:

"He's going away!"

"Yes," assented Bob. "He isn't after our hole."

"Lucky for him—and us!" chuckled Harry.

They waited and watched in silence until the man who had lamented his bursting buttons had moved a considerable distance away as evidenced by the ever-lessening sound he made, and then Bob, carefully shading his electric torch in the palm of his hand, stooped and picked something from amid the dried leaves.

"It hit my shoe," he explained.

"What is it?" asked Ned.

"A button," replied Bob and he held out a large bone one, with a few threads in the holes and attached to the threads a bit of cloth, showing that the button had been forcibly torn loose.

"Came off hard," chuckled Harry.

"Like as if he'd eaten too much supper and swelled," remarked Ned. "I've had it happen to me. Who do you reckon he was, anyhow?"

"Hard to say," answered Bob. "But I don't be-

lieve it could be anybody who knew about this entrance to the cave or he'd have gone down in it."

"He talked like a sailor," remarked Ned.

"He sure did," agreed Harry. "Better save the button, Bob."

"I sure will—it may prove a clue."

"Always thinking of detective work!" commented Ned.

"Well, who wouldn't after all that's happened?" demanded Bob and his chum had no answer ready.

"We certainly have had some experiences since we saw that aeroplane drop down this morning," agreed Harry.

"And we're as far from a solution now as we were then," declared Ned.

"Oh, we know a lot more than we did then, but it doesn't seem to fit together in any sane fashion," stated Bob. "I think there may be some connection between the aeroplane and the Chinese, but I can't quite make it out."

"Well what's in the chest Gib had and what did he and the Chink bring home in the red sack?" Harry asked.

"Give me time and I'll tell you," Bob promised. "I can't work this so fast as all that."

"That's right," agreed Ned. "You were several weeks on the Storm Mountain mystery."

"Well, we'll help you, that is if you want our help," spoke Harry.

"I sure do, boys! There's something deep here!"

"And it isn't all a cave, either!" chuckled Ned. "But, speaking of caves, we're near our front door so why not go in and get some rest. I crave sleep."

"Same here!" echoed Harry.

"'Tisn't a bad idea," conceded Bob. "The coast seems to be clear, now."

They made their way down the sloping entrance into the cave, or, rather, tunnel as it was at this point. But they soon emerged into where the strange, rocky, underground passage widened into a cavern. There they scraped together some leaves and debris for beds, got out their blankets, collected the second basket of food and their valises of possessions about them and prepared for slumber.

They had been on many queer and dangerous adventures together, but on none as odd as this. And they were so tired that the idea of sleeping in a cave, the extent of which and the secrets concealed in which, they knew nothing about, did not phase them in the least.

However they did not drop off to slumber at once. They lay rolled in their blankets and talked but all their talk, conjecturing and surmising could not get near the bottom of the mystery surround-

ing them—a mystery upon which they had stumbled most unexpectedly.

At last, however, they began to experience longer and longer periods when conversation lagged and finally, one after another, they fell asleep, Bob last, for his brain was very active.

"This sure is the queerest mystery I ever stacked up against," he murmured as his tired eyes finally closed.

What hour it was none of them knew, but all three were suddenly awakened by a noise. Bob sat up and reached for his flashlight. At the same time Ned called:

"Did you hear that?"

"I heard something!" Bob answered.

"What was it?" Harry wanted to know.

"Sounded like a lot of rocks falling," said Bob in a low voice.

"That's what I made it out to be," spoke Ned. "I hope this queer tunnel isn't going to cave in on us!"

"Hark!" cried Bob. "There it is again!"

CHAPTER VII

THE TREASURE BOX

CASTING aside their covering blankets and leaping to their feet, the three boys stood tensely alert in the darkness, their hearts beating fast while Bob fumbled with the switch of his flashlight. When he finally found it and sent a piercing beam of light shifting about the tunnel it showed absolutely nothing they had not seen before.

"Guess I must have dreamed it," muttered Bob.

"Dream nothing!" exclaimed Ned. "I heard a noise!"

"So did I!" echoed Harry. "And not far from here, either!"

"I thought some one was coming down the same hole we got in," added the fat youth.

"Do you mean that button-busting sailor?" Bob inquired.

"Sure! What say we take a look?"

"It's better than trying to go to sleep again and sort of wondering what made that racket," proposed Harry.

"Sleep!" exclaimed Ned. "I couldn't go to sleep again now. I got too much of a jumpy scare."

What time is it, anyhow? Must be close to morning. Give a look, somebody!"

Bob got his watch, held the flashlight close to the dial and announced:

"A little after six."

"Well, we must have had some sleep, anyhow," spoke Harry. "I feel better."

"I'll feel better after we have some breakfast," was Ned's ultimatum. "We've got all the makings; haven't we, Bob?"

"Yes, we did a pretty complete job in Ma Tolliver's kitchen and pantry. Got enough grub for quite a while."

"And coffee and the means to cook it," added Harry with a sigh of anticipated satisfaction. "That's what I crave—coffee!"

"All right, we'll have some," decided Bob. "But let's wait here quietly a few minutes and see if anything else happens."

So they waited in the darkness, Bob having extinguished his light, and they stretched lazily and eased their cramped muscles, for their beds had not been of the best. But they heard no further noise of any falling stones, which, they remembered, had accompanied their own second entrance into the tunnel by the hole through which they had seen the moon.

"It's possible," remarked Bob as he flashed his light again, "that somebody started to climb down

in here the same as we did, knocked some stones loose and then backed out."

"Somebody—or something!" said Ned, suggestively.

"What do you mean—something?" questioned Harry.

"Well, some animal. That bob-cat, for instance."

"It might be," agreed Bob. "A tunnel and a lot of connecting caves like these might well be the home of wild animals—foxes or bats."

"Bats! Holy mackerel! I hope we don't meet-up with any of those dirty half-rats half-birds!" exclaimed Ned, looking apprehensively up at the roof. "I hate 'em!"

"They won't hurt you," chuckled Bob. "But I don't believe this place has many wild animals in."

"Why not?" demanded Harry as he began to rummage in the basket of food and other supplies.

"Because there isn't any wild animal smell," went on Bob. "You all know how funny it smells when you go to the zoo, or a circus—wild animals have a distinct perfume of their own. Well, you haven't noticed it down here."

"The detective is right!" chanted Nat with a chuckle. "And I'm darn glad of it. Now for eats."

"I stuck some candles in the basket," spoke Bob. "Light a couple of them and save our flashlights."

"Clever dog!" said Harry. "You thought of lots of things. Now if you two want to go prospecting around a bit, say back to that hole we came in by to see if there are any signs of loose rocks, I'll get breakfast. But what about hot coffee, Bob. Can we make a fire in here?"

"We might, but better not. The smoke drifting out of the hole would give us away, and it might choke us. I stuck our little stove and some of that canned heat—solid alcohol cubes you know—in the basket. Boil the coffee on that."

"By golly! You're a peach!" exclaimed Harry. And then by the light of a couple of candles he began getting a modest breakfast, putting water from the spring into the coffee pot and setting it over the little portable stove, the solidified fuel of which gave off a hot flame but no smoke.

Meanwhile Bob and Ned made their way back to the second entrance, as they called the hole up on the hill, but an examination showed no more disturbance of the earth and rocks than might have been caused by their own egress and entrance the night before. There were several loose rocks, some of which had rolled to the floor of the tunnel. But whether these had been dislodged by the boys themselves, or knocked down later by some person or animal coming in, remained undetermined.

"Well, there's one thing sure," remarked Ned

as he and his chum, having stuck their heads out of the hole to breathe some fresh air, "and that is nobody's down in this tunnel but ourselves."

"I wouldn't gamble on that," remarked Bob.

"Why not?"

"Oh, you never can tell."

"I see!" chuckled Ned. "You're expecting to find the body!" and he playfully poked Bob in the ribs. However the young detective was immune to fun made of his natural abilities.

A little later, by the flickering gleams of a couple of candles stuck on projecting rocks down in the cave, the boys were eating a breakfast under as novel circumstances as any of them ever remembered. The oddity of it took away any slight discomfort. They had not many dishes, for they had not lingered to pack any in the Tolliver kitchen, so anxious were they not to be discovered. But they had some tin plates and cups, and their pocket knives served to cut the bread and bacon which, with coffee and some canned marmalade, formed the meal.

The remaining food having been put away, the tin dishes washed in the spring and their belongings packed for a quick shift, the boys began a systematic investigation of the tunnel. They found it to consist of a long, main passage with several smaller branches here and there, and, in

places, large vaulted caves. Some seemed very high.

"This is some tunnel!" exclaimed Ned, in wonder.

"And caves!" added Harry. "When we get out of here we can broadcast our discovery and maybe make a little money charging admission to this underground natural curiosity."

"I guess Gib will do all the charging," chuckled Bob. "It's on his land, at least two of the entrances are. But it sure is remarkable. I don't believe the folks in Midvale know about it."

"Doesn't seem so," agreed Harry.

They wandered for what seemed to them several miles, to and fro, up one passage and down another, carrying their things with them and marking such side tunnels as they explored by piling rocks at the entrances so they would not double on their trail.

Then, suddenly, as Ned was walking ahead, he stumbled and fell heavily, grunting as the breath seemed knocked from him.

"What's the matter?" cried Bob.

"I fell over something—or somebody!" gasped Ned. "Show a light, one of you!" For in his fall his flashlamp, which he had been carrying, had bounced out of his hand and he could not locate it.

Bob switched on his torch and focused the gleam upon the prostrate Ned and the object over which

he had stumbled. At the sight of this Bob and Harry gave exclamations of astonishment.

"The treasure box!" cried Bob.

"The one Gib and the Chink had!" added Harry.

"Sure as hoptoads!" echoed Ned, getting up and feeling of the small box. "Now we'll solve this mystery!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE TERRIBLE WIND

FINGERS that trembled in nervous anticipation and apprehension over this new find, soon set aglow some of the candles which gave a more diffused light than did the little electric torches, and in the gleams the boys began to examine more carefully the small iron chest and the locality around it. They saw nothing, besides the treasure box, that would give them any clues. The dry litter-covered floor of the tunnel retained no foot-prints.

"What's in it?" murmured Ned as he bent over to touch the box which had caused him to stumble and bark his shins painfully.

"It's real; isn't it?" Harry wanted to know.

"If you'd slammed into it as I did you'd say so," mournfully observed Ned.

"How heavy is it?" Harry asked.

"Not so very," answered Bob, picking up the iron chest. "It's got some weight of its own, but we can only guess how much the stuff inside it amounts to—if anything."

"What do you mean?" asked Ned. "Don't you

think there's something inside this box, my detective friend?"

"It remains to be seen," spoke Bob, dryly.

"Ha! Ha! A joke—seen!" chuckled Harry.

"But let's open it and find out."

"Better find out first, hadn't we," suggested Bob, "how it got down here?"

"That's so!" echoed Ned. "It certainly didn't walk, and that would mean somebody brought it, which would also mean there is, or has been, somebody in this tunnel besides ourselves."

"Even Bob couldn't deduce any more than that," spoke Harry. "This box must have come from the spring cave where we last saw Gib and the Chink dickering over it."

"But who brought it here?" Ned wanted to know.

"Maybe it was the person we heard rattling down the rocks early this morning," suggested Harry.

"Gib or the Chink, I should say," went on Ned.

"That sounds reasonable," agreed Bob. "But there is another theory to take into consideration. From what we saw, this box held or still holds, something of value both to the Chinese in the yellow robe and to our boarding house keeper, Gib Tolliver. Now it may be that Gib found some treasure on his farm and tried to dispose of it, secretly, to the Chinese. Then, perhaps, Uncle Tom

caught onto the fact that his brother was trying to cheat him, and Uncle Tom sneaked the chest away and hid it here."

"By golly, that's right!" cried Ned.

"The only thing that knocks those theories higher than a kite," went on Bob with a smile, "is that neither Gib, Uncle Tom nor the Chink knows there is a tunnel here back of the rocky wall of the spring cave."

"I know we heard Gib say there was no opening back of the spring-house cave rear wall," agreed Harry. "And the Chink seemed to believe him, but maybe Gib was only saying that to throw the Chinaman off the scent."

"It's growing more and more of a puzzle and mystery," sighed Ned. "Let's hear what our detective friend has to say."

"I think the Chinese in the yellow robe brought this box here to hide it," was Bob's opinion. "Gib hasn't had much practice in fooling a wily Chinese, so I think the Chink was wise to the fact that there was an opening back of the wall. And, somehow, he found it and hid the box here."

"But why?" asked Harry.

"For the same reason you thought Gib or Uncle Tom did—to throw somebody off the track," answered Bob. "Chinese are awfully tricky, you know. This one may have agreed to buy this treasure—whatever it is," and he kicked the box,

"from Gib. Then, when he got the chance he slipped the box down here without paying."

"Then there can't be gold in it," declared Ned.

"Why not?" came from Harry.

"Because if it was gold Gib wouldn't have to dicker with the Chinese to buy it. He could sell it in the open market. Anybody would buy gold," Ned ended triumphantly.

"He's right!" exclaimed Bob. "If there is anything in this box it is some sort of treasure that could best, and perhaps only, be sold to a Chinese."

"Now you're talking!" exclaimed Ned.

"Well, let's get through with talking and open this box," proposed Harry. "That's the only way to find out."

But when the boys came to examine the iron treasure box more closely they found it securely fastened with a heavy padlock that passed through a staple over which a hasp closely fitted. There was no key in sight."

"Have to bust it open!" suggested Harry.

"Try and do it!" mocked Bob. "This box isn't so very heavy, as far as weight goes, but it's as solid as an express safe. In fact that's what it seems to be. It's smaller than those generally used but it looks like one of them."

The other lads agreed with him and Ned exclaimed:

"Maybe that Chink robbed an express car and brought the loot here for Gib to dispose of. Or maybe the Chink couldn't get the box open and wanted Gib to help."

"That won't wash," declared Bob. "The box was open when we looked into the spring cave."

"That's so," murmured Ned.

"Say, maybe there's a secret spring, or some other way of opening this box without a key," suggested Harry. "Take a look!"

However, they could see no other feasible way of raising the iron-studded lid than by taking off the padlock, and this baffled them. The boys had keys in their pockets but none fitted the lock. In handling the box it was shaken up and down several times, and the boys listened to a dull, muffled movement of something inside.

"It isn't heavy enough for gold, or money," Ned remarked.

"Maybe it's somebody's laundry," chuckled Harry. "Put it down on the ground, Bob, and we'll try another way to get it open."

"How?" asked the young detective as he complied with his chums suggestion.

"Bash it open with a rock," went on Harry. "Here's a big one!"

He raised a heavy rock over his head and was about to bring it down on top of the box when Bob caught his hand.

"None of that!" Bob cried.

"Why not?"

"It may hold powder, or something explosive," argued Bob. "And a nice mess you'd make of things blowing us up here in the tunnel."

"Powder! You're crazy!" cried Harry. "Would a Chink come here to buy powder when he and his friends were the inventors of explosives? He probably knows more about gunpowder than Guy Fawkes ever did."

"Well, I didn't mean that, exactly," Bob went on with a smile. "I had to think of something on the spur of the moment to keep you from being rash. But that chest very likely contains something valuable and it would be foolish to risk smashing it by cracking open the lid. We've got to do something else."

"But what?" demanded Harry.

"Let's take it outside and slip off quietly to some locksmith. We don't have to go to one in Midvale. We can go over the hill to the next town—Chester."

"That's a good idea," agreed Ned. "And after we get the box open, and find out what the treasure is, we can divide it up and draw lots to see who gets the chest for a souvenir."

"You forget it belongs to Gib, or the Chink—or somebody!" Bob reminded his chums.

"Sure! I was only joking," Ned answered.

"But your idea's a good one to get this out in the light and open and have an expert work on it," decided Harry. "Come on!"

With Bob walking ahead to light the way, Ned and Harry followed, carrying the box between them. One could have managed the box alone but it would have been a bit awkward.

It was not an easy journey back through the dark tunnel to the place where they had entered it for the second time. The way was uneven and in places the passage narrowed unexpectedly so that more than once they bumped into the rocky sides with more force than comfort. But they kept on until they reached a place where the underground passage split like the arms of a letter Y.

"Which way?" asked Ned, as Bob came to a halt.

The young detective hesitated a moment and then, pointing to a little pile of stones, remarked:

"Take the left passage. That's the one we came down. I put those stones there."

Then his chums remembered. They went on for perhaps a couple of hundred yards farther when, as they rounded another turn, there was suddenly revealed in the gleam of the electric torch, something dark huddled in the middle of the passage.

"Look out!" gasped Harry.

"What is it?" cried Ned, dropping his end of the box.

"There's a man—or a couple of 'em—lying on the floor!" murmured Harry. "Holy cats!"

"More light here, fellows!" sharply ordered Bob.

And when gleams from three electric flash lights were focused on the objects in the tunnel they seemed to be the bodies of two or three men, huddled up and covered with bright, yellow robes—robes like the one worn by the Chinese who was in the spring cave with Gib Tolliver.

"Well, what the——" began Ned.

But Bob interrupted him with a shout and, springing forward, pulled one of the robes aside. Instead of covering any huddled forms they were draped over bundles of gay and richly embroidered silken garments, of a kind worn by wealthy Chinese.

"Somebody must have left their Hallowe'en costumes here!" exclaimed Harry.

"It looks so," agreed Bob. "But finding these, I think, tells us how that box got down here. The Chinese, or some friends of his, brought it. They must have made the noise of falling rocks we heard."

"But where are they now—the Chinks I mean?" asked Ned. "And why did they leave their clothes behind?"

"It's a queer mystery, more than anybody can solve off-hand," said Bob. "Wonder how I'd look

in one of these?" he added with a whimsical laugh. He slipped a yellow robe on, laying his flashlight down on the box. Then Ned and Harry did the same, and, finding there were three of the rich, yellow garments, each lad put on the gay attire and they stood looking at each other, half laughing, half afraid of what might portend. They even put on jackets and trousers, taking off the yellow robes and again donning them over the other parts of the costumes.

"If we could only keep these until we got a chance to go to a masquerade barn dance, what a sensation we'd cause!" chuckled Ned.

"I'm going to keep mine!" declared Harry.

"I don't know that we can do that," began Bob. "For if——"

He did not finish for, suddenly, the tunnel was filled with a strange, roaring sound that seemed to echo in it from end to end. And there was an ominous rumbling that caused Harry to yell:

"It's an earthquake!"

They started to run, but fear held them fast. Then Bob noticed something odd about the yellow robe that Harry had on. He stood near a small side tunnel, and his yellow garment was floating away from his hips, standing out almost straight from his body.

"Look!" murmured Bob, pointing. "Look at that!"

At the same moment Harry became aware of the phenomenon and looking at his outstanding robe, and noticing that those of Bob and Ned were not affected, cried:

"What's the matter? Am I bewitched?" Then he yelled. "Oh, I'm being blown away! Grab me! Hold me!"

Startled and alarmed by this weird happening, Bob and Ned could only stand there and stare for a moment. They saw Harry lean forward at a sharp angle—lean against nothing they could see, and yet some invisible force was preventing him from toppling over. He had to fold his arms across his chest to keep the yellow robe from being torn from him as if by unseen hands.

"What is it?" cried Ned.

"It's a wind—a terrible wind!" cried Harry. "It's tearing me away. I can't hold down much longer! Grab me!"

CHAPTER IX

A CHASE IN THE DARK

BEFORE Ned and Bob could spring to the side of their chum, so mysteriously fighting that weird, powerful wind, Harry himself had managed to struggle his own way back to a place of safety.

"What the dickens was it?" cried Ned as Harry stood beside him, that gay, yellow garment now hanging normally in folds about him.

"It was the most terrible gale I ever tried to stand up against!" Harry exclaimed.

"Gale?" cried Bob. "Why, there isn't any wind here."

It was true enough. Where the three boys now stood grouped around the mysterious chest there was no more than a gentle zephyr of air.

"Well, it blew where I was!" declared Harry. "Look! I stood out there," and he pointed to a branch tunnel entering the main one at a right angle, almost. "Here the rocky wall cuts off the blast."

"Let's see if it works out," suggested Bob.

He went to where the two tunnels intersected and thrust out his hand holding in it the lower

edge of his loose, yellow robe. In an instant the corner of the garment was whipped from his hand and fluttered in a strong wind like a flag in the blast of an electric fan.

"Hot dog! That's queer!" cried Ned and he moved as though to go out into the wind-swept tunnel.

"Come back!" cried Harry. "It will blow you away!"

They had to shout to be heard above the roaring of the blast, and it seemed to make their ears numb with its mighty voice. It was like the subdued roaring of some unseen demon.

Bob drew back. Harry had prevented Ned from stepping out from the protecting shelter of the wall of the cross tunnel into the mighty blast and the boys were wondering over the weird, natural phenomenon when Bob uttered a startled cry and pointed to where Harry had lately stood.

In the gleam of the electric torches the boys saw what appeared to be the dismembered parts of Chinese bodies floating along on the unseen current of air—an invisible river.

For a moment a terrible fear gripped the lads and then Bob laughed in a relieved way as he said:

"It's just some more Chinese costumes. They must have been having a regular party down here."

"Well, if it's no worse than that, all right," commented Ned. "But it sure looked as if somebody had been making Chinese hash and it got away from them."

"Gave me a queer feeling," spoke Harry whose nerves were a little upset by what he had gone through.

"And look at what's happening now; would you!" cried Ned.

He pointed toward the dimly illuminated floor of the wind-swept tunnel, where Harry had been standing. The floor there, as in other places of the strange series of caves and passages, was covered with dried leaves, sticks and dust, the stuff that is usually to be found on the arid bed of a stream.

And now this material was being swept along in a swirling, light cloud, light in color because the dust was probably made from powdered granite rock, mingled with a white sandstone.

"What makes that?" asked Harry.

Bob advanced to the edge of the cross wall and held out his hand. He wanted to feel the current of air, but there was none to feel. The strange wind appeared to have died away except that it was now sweeping along the floor of the second tunnel, carrying debris with it.

"More queer stunts!" commented Ned.

"It's queer, but easily explained, I think," stated

Bob. "There is a current of air blowing along this tunnel. There's no question about that. But the air doesn't blow regularly or we'd have felt it before while we were wandering about."

"You're right so far, but why is it blowing along the bottom now, while, before, it was about even with my waist?" asked Harry.

"I think," went on Bob, "that this is a changeable wind, or blast of air, like water coming from a hose. Something, at first, directed the current along about three feet from the ground. Now it's changed, and is lower and it's blowing the sticks, leaves and dust."

"Sounds reasonable," admitted Harry.

"It's like standing on a subway platform when an express train rushes past," suggested Ned.

"Well, this is a subway all right," remarked Bob. "Except for the crowds and the trains."

"I wonder if we could manage to pass over the cross tunnel, through the blast as it is now blowing along the bottom, and get somewhere?" suggested Bob, after they had watched the wind-swept debris being whirled off into unknown space.

"We might try," Ned assented. "But what's the idea?"

"We want to find out all we can about this tunnel," Bob said. "We can't do that by staying here."

"You're right," agreed Harry. "But it's as

much as our lives are worth to go out into that blast!"

"I think there won't be much danger when it's so low down," said Bob. "Let's take a chance. We can hold together and carry the iron chest to weight us down."

Not stopping more than to fasten closely about them the flowing, yellow robes they still wore, the boys began the experiment. Ned and Harry held the iron handles at the ends of the treasure chest, while Bob walked ahead, his chums each gripping one hand in folds of the garment about Bob's waist, while for weight Bob carried the basket of food and the valises containing their possessions.

There was a brief struggle against the blast which, however, was not so strong now that it was a swiftly moving strata of air along the bottom of the passage. But enough dust, dirt and other debris was blown into the ears, eyes and noses of the lads to cause them considerable discomfort before they crossed the transverse, wind-swept tunnel and stood again in a calm place.

"Whew!" gasped Harry as he leaned against the rocky wall to rest. "That was fierce!"

"Like a tornado on a small scale," agreed Ned.

"I guess we're all right now," remarked Bob. "Except we've got to get to the bottom of this mystery," and he tapped his foot on the chest his chums set down.

"Doesn't seem as if we'd ever find it," argued Ned. "Any time you fellows want to quit and go up for air don't let me detain you."

"Do you want to quit?" asked Bob, suddenly.

"No, but I thought maybe you did."

"No!" declared Harry.

"No!" echoed Bob.

"Motion's carried!" chuckled Ned. "I'll make it unanimous. But let's travel on. We can't discover anything hanging around here."

They moved on through passage after passage, lighting their way now with candles to save their flashlight, for the wind did not blow where they were. Then, suddenly Ned stopped and remarked:

"Hark!"

"To what?" Bob asked.

"I hear running water," Ned went on. "That means we can make more coffee and eat. I'm hungry again!"

His chums did not laugh at him, for they were in the same state and soon they had found a bubbling spring, in a sort of circular cave of vast extent and there they ate and rested.

When they had finished and had collected the food remaining, calculating that they had enough for at least another day in the strange tunnels and caves, they were ready to discuss their next move.

"It's queer," remarked Ned, "that we can't

find the original hole to this series of tunnels and caves, Bob. I mean the place where we first tumbled in."

"That's right!" echoed Harry.

"It is a bit queer," Bob agreed. "Though as a matter of fact the hole we came in last night, I mean the one where the button-busting stranger was lamenting, is much handier than the one I found. It's right where we know where to locate it, too."

"For the matter of that—yes," Harry agreed. "But, just for satisfaction, it would be a good thing to locate the other hole. It's always a good thing to have two exits from a place like this. If that wind gets to blowing again so we can't make our way back to the easier hole we might be glad of the one we fell into."

"It's good dope," agreed Bob. "And as a matter of fact I've been looking for that original entrance ever since we've been down here. But it must be off in a side passage we have skipped."

"But what we'd better do," proposed Ned, "is to do what we were going to do when we struck these queer clothes and came across the big wind."

"What's that?" asked Bob.

"Go up for air, at least temporarily, and have this box opened. Not until we find what's inside it will we know what sort of a mystery we're working on."

"Yes, that's a good idea," Bob said. "I think we might as well go to the place we went out last night—the moon-hole so to speak—and get at the secret of this chest."

"All in favor—" began Harry, when Ned called sharply:

"Listen!"

They froze into silence and then to their strained ears came the echo of footsteps resounding down the long tunnel.

"Somebody's coming!" murmured Bob.

"Sounds like it!" added Harry.

"The Chinese after these Hallowe'en costumes!" whispered Ned. "Let's take 'em off!"

"Won't have time!" suddenly exclaimed Bob. "Grab up the stuff, fellows. Ned, you and I'll carry the box for a change and let Harry bring the grub and camp stuff! Lively! They're coming fast!"

The boys spoke in low, tense tones, listening between sentences, and heard the footsteps coming nearer. They had been eating by the light of a candle and Bob suddenly reached up and blew this out.

"What's the idea?" whispered Harry.

"We don't want them to see us! We've got to get away in the dark!"

Each lad knew what he was to do, and while Ned and Bob picked up the iron chest, Harry

gathered the valises and basket of food. Then they ran down a wide tunnel in the darkness.

At first they slipped and stumbled, for they had been in the light of the candle and the sudden transition to blackness was disconcerting. But soon their eyes became a little accustomed to the gloom and they could avoid, more by a sense of feeling than sight, the rocky walls on either hand.

On and on they ran in the gloom. The long, yellow garments hampered them and they wished they had not donned them, but it was no time now to stop and take them off.

"Can you hear them?" asked Ned.

"Yes," Bob answered.

"Which way?" asked Harry, in the lead as he saw, by a cautious flashing of his electric torch, that they were at another two-way part of the tunnel. "Left or right?"

Ned and Bob came to a halt. Then, from behind them came yells in shrill, high-pitched voices.

"Chinese!" gasped Ned.

"That's what they are, and I guess they're after us!" cried Bob. "Go on! Run! To the right!" He made a quick decision and the three were again speeding away while after them, in the dark, raced the yelling Orientals.

CHAPTER X

CAPTURED

RACING through a strange and mysterious tunnel in the dark, or with the gloom at best illuminated only by occasional flashes of light, is not an easy thing to do. Especially when behind one there is a band of infuriated Chinese. The boys soon found this to be the case, for they bumped and bruised themselves against the rocky walls of the passage and slipped and stumbled as they rushed on.

Finally Ned, after a severe bump, stopped short and cried:

"Show a light, Bob! I'm all busted!"

"I got a nasty crack myself!" added Harry.

"Keep on! Keep on!" Bob advised. "We don't want those Chinks to catch us!"

"I don't believe they're coming now," said Harry. "Listen!"

Their own panting breaths were the only sounds in the dark, strange tunnel, and, convinced that the pursuit was over, at least for the moment, Bob flashed his light.

All about them were the rocky walls of the tun-

nel the windings of which they had been traversing for some time. They were not sure whether they had been in this section before, for in the dark they could not be certain of the turns they had taken.

"Say, I've had about enough of this!" remarked Ned as he leaned up against the rocky wall. "What say we quit? There isn't much to gain by staying down here any more playing hide and seek. We've got the treasure box and enough Chink clothes to fit us out for a masquerade; so what's the use?"

"I want to find out more about this tunnel," said Bob.

"Don't blame you," came from Harry. "But what about going outside, having a look inside this box and then coming back if we want to?"

"That's fair enough," agreed Bob. "We have been down here quite a while, and we'll need more grub soon. But do you mind if we go to the end of the passage we're in now, just to see where it ends?"

"Oh, I'll trail along with you that far," conceded Ned. "But I want to eat, that is if we're safe from those Chinks."

"Don't hear them coming," remarked Bob after a listening pause. "And eating is all right by me. Though I do want to see what's at the end of this passage."

His light revealed a longer and straighter section of the tunnel than any the boys had yet been in. It was new ground for them to cover.

"Want to stay here and eat?" Bob asked.

"We ought to get to some place where there's water," objected Ned. "I hate a dry lunch, and I need coffee after that run."

"It wouldn't go bad," agreed Harry.

"I only hope," spoke Bob, musingly, "that the Chinks don't bust in on us while we're eating."

"I guess we threw them off the trail the way we twisted and turned," Harry said. "We sure played tag with 'em!"

They listened again, but heard no sounds and concluded that their pursuers had either given up the chase or were down some other gallery of the tunnel. So they prepared to move on, first however, taking off the Chinese garments and rolling them into bundles.

"I wonder if they were really after us or that?" spoke Harry as he and Ned were about to pick up the iron chest.

"Maybe both," said Bob.

"Then it might be that Gib was chasing us as well as some Chinks," suggested Ned. "Or else Gib and that Chink he was going to sell this treasure to had a falling out and Gib was chasing the Chink or the other way around."

"Or what have you!" chuckled Harry.

"Yes, it's a bit of a Chinese puzzle," admitted Bob. "But we've got several parts of it in our possession," and he nodded at the box and the bundles of robes.

They travelled on through the darkness, only illuminated by one of the flashlights until Bob, who was in the lead, gave a sudden exclamation.

"What's the matter—Chinks?" asked Ned.

"No, but we've come to the end of the tunnel—or at least one end and it's a solid one," spoke Bob.

He flashed his light up and down on what seemed to be a big wall of rock across the passage they were traversing. The sides of the tunnel, or, rather, the roof and bottom, came together in a horizontal V which rapidly narrowed.

"No getting past that!" observed Ned.

"Doesn't seem so," agreed Ned. "But here's water and this is a good place to eat." He pointed to a small stream running along one side of the tunnel and disappearing at the right hand corner of the V shaped opening, at the widest part.

"Yes, it's a good place to eat all right," agreed Bob. "But if those Chinks come along we're cornered," and he waved at the heavy stone wall which seemed to close the tunnel effectually.

"We can fight best, if we have to, with our backs to the wall," suggested Harry. "But maybe

there's a way through there after all. The water's running out."

"We'll have a look," said Bob.

"Let's eat first," proposed Ned, pathetically.

So they got out their food, finding enough only, as Ned classed it "for a meal and a half."

"Which means we'll have to go out, soon, to get more grub, anyhow," added Harry. "Then we can open that box."

The alcohol stove was set burning, coffee wafted its aroma through the tunnel and soon the boys were eating as enthusiastically as only normal, healthy lads, with a great adventure before them, can eat. For they were all sure the greater part of the adventure still lay before them. They had yet to solve the secret of the box.

And then, when they had eaten, they were so tired that they got their blankets and stretched out on the debris-covered floor of the tunnel, not intending to sleep. But this they did, and they might have been surprised a dozen times by those yelling Chinese, only the Orientals didn't happen to appear.

Bob was the first to awaken and, looking at his watch, was surprised to note that he had slumbered several hours. He awakened his chums, who were equally astonished.

"What time of day is it, anyhow?" asked Ned.

"Must be morning again," Bob said, making a hasty calculation.

"Well, morning is the time to start work," chuckled Harry, "so let's have a go at that crack and see if we can get through at one side of the place the water flows out."

"Better let me try," suggested Bob as fat Ned was about to crawl into the opening. "I'm the smallest of the three and I can squeeze in and out where you couldn't."

"Thanks," murmured Ned, but he drew back and Bob went in with his torch. He seemed to disappear from view and his chums were not a little alarmed at this. But a moment later Bob called back.

"It's all right! There's a way out and it's big enough for you, Ned. Come on!"

A few seconds later and the three lads had left the tunnel. The V shaped crack was an exit to a little hollow on a side hill, the hole being screened by trees and bushes. And just below them, to their surprise, was Cedar River flowing along. They were several miles from Gib Tolliver's house.

"Well, what do you know about that?" cried Ned as he saw the stream.

"And what do you make of that?" asked Bob. He pointed to what was a greater surprise, a rather large motor boat moored not far from the

bank where the boys had emerged from the tunnel.

On the deck of the vessel, staring in their direction, though whether he saw them they could not be sure, Ned, Bob and Harry observed a Chinese!

"Whew!" softly whistled Harry, moving back a little the better to screen himself behind the bushes.

"Queer; isn't it?" suggested Bob in a low voice.

"More than queer!" agreed Ned. "Why we've been fishing in this river yet we never knew one entrance to the tunnel was so close."

"That isn't so queer as it is to see that boat and the Chink captain," said Harry. "Looks as if he was waiting for somebody."

"Maybe us," suggested Ned with a chuckle, and he spoke more truly than he knew.

"He surely can't be waiting here just to admire the scenery," Bob said. "By golly, fellows, but this mystery is getting deeper all the while."

"You've got to put on your thinking cap if you solve it," said Ned.

Unobserved, as they supposed and hoped, the boys remained behind the screen of bushes where they had emerged from the tunnel.

Meanwhile the lone and silent Oriental slowly paced the deck of the trim motor craft, the lines

and fittings of which the boys observed with envy. They had each one longed for just such a boat as that.

The Chinese wore American garments, of the cut and natty style affected by Chinese who forsake their native dress. And as he walked up and down, occasionally glancing toward shore, Harry suddenly said:

"I think I've got it!"

"What, the chickenpox?" asked Ned.

"No, the solution to this boat end of the puzzle. This Chink is the butler, or steward of the boat and he's waiting for the captain to come on board. It must be some rich guy who's cruising around here."

"A hot lot of cruising he could do on Cedar River or Greenwood Lake," chuckled Bob.

"Well, that's what I think, anyhow," went on Harry. "If any of you have a better theory out with it!"

But Ned seemed to have none, and if Bob had he did not speak of it, but said:

"We can travel on, I guess. Can't stay here all day when we need more grub and want to get that box open. This boat is openly cruising around, or is going to or has been, and we can find out about it by making inquiries. That Chink doesn't seem to have anything to hide."

"And getting more grub appeals to me," Ned

stated. "We've been living on cold victuals long enough."

"I'll be glad to find out what's in that box we left in the tunnel," remarked Bob. "We'd better slip back in and get it, and then strike up over the hill to find a locksmith."

He turned toward the slope which went down to the river, in which side hill was the hole by which they had emerged from the tunnel. Ned and Harry started to follow, but they never had a chance to get far from their hiding place behind the bushes. For, as they turned to leave, they were suddenly attacked from behind.

There was the rush of many feet, low ejaculations of command in guttural, singsong tones and Bob, Ned and Harry had a momentary glimpse of several ugly-looking Chinese. Then, before they could put up their hands to fight, their heads were covered with heavy, burlap bags which cut off their visions and stifled their cries. At the same time their arms were pinioned from behind and their feet bound with cords despite their kicking.

Then each lad felt himself being picked up and carried along. They had been captured by their mysterious enemies.

XI

MYSTERIOUS PRISONERS

MOI FONG, sleek, suave Oriental that he was paced the deck of the motor boat with more perturbation than he cared to acknowledge even to himself. But his habitual calmness did not leave him when several of his men carried on board the *Swan* those sack-enveloped bundles which represented Bob, Ned and Harry.

Muffled as their ears were by the burlap bags, the boys could still hear the singsong, rising and falling guttural tones in which the Chinese conversed. There seemed to be excited questions and answers passing between Moi Fong and his men—sharp interrogations, the replies to which did not appear to give the almon-eyed master of the craft any great satisfaction.

For he snapped out rasping words, words, which no matter how they were disguised in that strange tongue, indicated that something was wrong.

But wrong or not, and deep as the mystery was, the boys were firmly held as prisoners. This they discovered very soon, when, after they had been

carried on board over a rather uncertain gang-plank, their captors mingling Chinese oaths, gasps, expostulations and expletives, they found themselves, still bound and bagged, stretched out on bunks in the cabin of the *Swan*.

Silence followed the placing of the three out-stretched on the bunks—silence after the departure of shuffling feet and the closing and locking of a door.

But it was not in the nature of Bob Dexter and his chums long to submit tamely to the indignities put upon them. They had been taken by surprise—so completely as to render resistance out of the question—and they had been roughly handled by Orientals skilled in the ways of rendering prisoners helpless. But though they were temporarily knocked out, the boys were far from disabled now.

So when they no longer felt themselves in the hands of their captors, resting quietly on bunks, the lads began to struggle to release themselves. Their bonds had been put on hurriedly and evidently only securely enough to permit of them being carried unresistingly on board. So that after some strenuous efforts each prisoner succeeded in slipping off the ropes from his arms, then the heads were freed and lastly the ankles.

They sat up on the edges of three lower berths, rubbing the painful welts caused by the ropes,

gulping in much needed breaths of fresh air and then Harry exclaimed:

"Well, what do you make of this, Bob?"

"Of all the nerve!" gasped Ned.

"We certainly were up against it," Bob admitted. "And I confess I don't know what to make of it." His detective abilities seemed to have gone aglimmering.

"We're not hurt, anyhow," observed Ned with assumed cheerfulness.

"That's one good thing," agreed Harry. "But why did they capture us and who are they?"

"Chinks, of course," Ned answered.

"I know that. But what about this boat, for we're on a boat; aren't we?" He looked about him. Unmistakably it was a cabin they were in. It was well fitted up, not exactly in Oriental style though there were several objects of Chinese ornamentation about.

"We must have been caught by the Chinks we heard howling in the tunnel back of us when we ran," said Ned. "And Gib Tolliver had something to do with it."

"I don't think so," spoke Bob.

"Well, I believe the Chink we saw on the boat was the same one who was with Gib in the spring cave looking at the treasure box."

"That might be," Bob admitted. "But Gib wasn't in the bunch that bagged us."

"Bagged is right!" muttered Harry kicking the sack on the floor at his feet. "But why should they make us prisoners?"

"It's all part of the mystery," Bob said.

"Then for the love of my grandmother's cheese-cakes solve it if you call yourself a detective!" exclaimed Ned.

"I hope to." Bob was smiling now. This was just what he liked though he had to confess he was not a little worried and puzzled.

The boys looked around the cabin. They had tried the door but found it locked. Over head was a broad V shaped skylight in the middle of the cabin roof, but the two glass sides were shut, and evidently locked in place, while the glass was protected by heavy brass bars. In the centre of the cabin was a table. About it were some chairs. There were lockers and the boys counted two upper and two lower bunks on each side, making sleeping accommodations for eight.

"This must be the main cabin," was Bob's opinion. "The crew probably berths forward and the engine room and kitchen must be aft. It's a trim little boat."

"We were trimmed all right," muttered Harry gloomily.

"Oh, we'll get out of here!" predicted Ned. "Come on, Bob, let's bust out!"

"Sure!" echoed Harry. "Kick down that door!"

He sprang toward it but at that moment the portal was suddenly unlocked, opened and there glided, rather than walked, into the cabin the same suave, sleek, inscrutable-eyed Chinese the boys had seen pacing the upper deck.

"I am Moi Fong," said the Oriental in gentle tones and with a very good accent. "Who are you?" He waved courteously for them to occupy chairs.

"I don't know that it's any of your business!" snapped Bob, whose temper was rising.

"I shall make it my business," was the calm reply and the Chinese took a chair while his prisoners remained standing.

"Well, if it's any satisfaction for you to know, and since we aren't trying to keep it secret, I'll tell you," went on Bob, and he mentioned their names, but stopped there. "And what's more," he went on, "we want to know why we were handled as we were and brought here? If we were captured in mistake for somebody else by your Tong roughnecks, you'd better let us go!"

"That's what!" echoed Harry.

"Or we'll get the police after you!" threatened Ned.

Moi Fong smiled slowly and unctiously. Then he said slowly:

"It was no mistake. You were captured because I gave orders to that effect. You will be held prisoners until you give it up!"

"Give it up? Give what up?" cried Bob in amazement.

"The Jint San," was the strange answer.

"Jint San!" murmured Bob.

"Jint San!" echoed his chums in turn.

Then, like a flash, it came into Bob's mind.

The mysterious iron box!

They had left it hidden in the cave, together with their own belongings and the Oriental robes, near the egress from the tunnel. In the excitement of capturing them the Chinese had evidently not found the strange little chest.

"The Jint San," went on Moi Fung, smiling again, though it was obvious he was keeping his temper in control by an effort. "I must have it. You alone know where it is. Until you give it up you will be my prisoners. And after a certain time——"

He did not complete the sinister sentence but smiled—a slow, inscrutable smile—his thin lips, that seemed cruel and eager beneath his long black moustache, parting slightly showing his yellow teeth.

"Jint San!" murmured Bob in bewilderment and then, like a flash it came into his mind.

Gib Tolliver, in some mysterious way, had be-

come possessed of a most desirable Chinese treasure—a treasure concealed in the iron chest and the boys, by hap and chance had made off with it from under the very nose of Moi Fong.

But what was the Jint San? How had Gib Tolliver, prosaic farmer that he was, become possessed of it?

Vexing, puzzling questions.

With his eyes half closed, the Chinese slowly regarded the boys in turn. He was waiting for them to speak, but neither Bob, Ned nor Harry knew what to say.

Then Moi Fong, with a slow, deliberate motion, open a drawer in the table at which he sat.

"Look out!" warned Ned.

"He's going to pull a gun or knife!" gasped Harry.

But Moi Fong smiled again and took out a small, bronze brazier—in pattern a coiled snake—a Cobra—the ugly head and extended hood rising upright from the coils beneath. Supported on the head with eyes of rubies that sparkled with a baleful light was a little flat tray. On this tray Moi Fong sprinkled some powder from a red lacquered box and smiled again.

Then suddenly, and most prosaically it seemed, he drew from his pocket a shiny, automatic cigar lighter and from the benzine flame of this, having

set the wick aglow with a motion of his thumb, he ignited the powder on the snake brazier.

Instantly a thick smoke arose and a strange, penetrating odor filled the cabin.

"By cracky!" yelled Bob springing forward, his voice choking with anger. "You're not going to kill us that way!"

"Grab him!" yelled Ned as Moi Fong started to rise from his chair.

Harry was about to leap to the assistance of his two chums in subduing the still smiling Chinese when from the deck above their heads sounded the running of many feet and shrill cries of alarm.

CHAPTER XII

THE CHINESE GIANT

THIS sudden commotion and alarm on deck caused the boys to pause for a moment in their intention of throwing themselves upon Moi Fong. And this hesitation the Oriental used to his advantage. Thought was scarcely more rapid than the action of the Chinese. With a snake-like glide of his body he eluded the hands of Bob Dexter, swung away from Ned and Harry and turned with the ease of a veteran football player getting away from a tackle.

He sprang to the door, pulled it open, glided out and slammed the portal behind him before the boys could run around the table that separated them from Moi Fong and grasp him.

"He's gone!" gasped Ned.

"Looks like it!" grimly echoed Harry.

"Come on—after him!" yelled Bob.

But the slamming of the portal had locked that barrier with a spring catch and the boys flung themselves against it in vain. It opened outward, but now held firmly. And it was a thick and heavy door.

"Can't move it!" muttered Bob after they had tried together and singly.

"Maybe we can kick out a panel and reach the key or spring back the catch from outside," suggested Harry.

"Try it!" came from Ned.

"Let's get rid of this, first!" cried Bob and he made a dive for the snake brazier on the table. Thick smoke was eddying up from the receptacle on the cobra's head. Bob picked it up, holding it well away from his face and was about to call to Harry to open a porthole so the thing could be tossed out when the young detective gave a laugh and set the brazier down.

"What's the matter?" demanded Ned.

"I might have guessed it!" said Bob, chuckling. "That smouldering stuff—it's only punk—incense—some sort of Joss powder, I suppose. I thought it was meant to dope us, so I was going to throw it out."

"It did look that way," agreed Ned. "Hum! Incense! Not a bad smell. I used to call on a girl who was crazy about it. Used to burn it every time I came to see her."

"Maybe she couldn't stand you!" chuckled Harry, and he got out of reach of his chum's fist.

"Talking about girls," mused Bob, "it doesn't ever seem that we did such things; does it? I mean

such a lot has happened in the last couple of days that we seem to be in another land."

"Or taking part in a moving picture play!" chuckled Harry. "But what was that noise we heard up on deck? It seemed to startle Moi Fong."

"It did," Bob agreed.

"Maybe the police started to raid this boat," suggested Harry.

"I wish they would, so we could get out of here," murmured Ned.

"I don't," came from Bob.

"You don't? You mean you don't want to get loose?" cried Harry.

"Oh, yes, that. But I don't want the police butting in. I want to solve this mystery myself."

"I guess you're the only one who can," sighed Ned. "Jint San! What the dickens is it?"

"Whatever's in that iron box," stated Bob.

"And if the fellows who trussed us up and brought us on board had any gumption they would have spotted that crack by which we got out of the tunnel. Then they'd have gone in and picked up the box and it would be all over but the shouting."

"Well, here's another funny thing," said Harry. "This Moi Fong has us brought on board all bound up, and we're locked in a cabin. When he comes in we're sitting up and taking notice and he doesn't seem a bit surprised that we got loose."

"I guess he knew we would get loose, or some of his men saw us doing it," said Bob. "They could look down at us from there," and he pointed to the skylight of the cabin.

"Then we're being spied on!" exclaimed Ned.

"Probably," retorted Bob. "It can't be helped."

"Well," went on Harry, "I'd just like to know whether that Jint San is a big diamond or a ruby or some holy Chinese god or idol."

"Most likely the last," guessed Ned. "The Chinks are great on idols, Joss and things like that. But how in the world Gib Tolliver ever got hold of a Chinese idol beats me!"

"Maybe Soy Ting had something to do with it?" suggested Bob.

"You mean the Midvale laundryman?"

"Yes."

"How could he be mixed up in it, Bob?"

"Well, you know Ma Tolliver said Soy Ting brought around the strange Chink—the one we saw up in the vineyards with a yellow robe."

"Yes, Soy may be in it," Ned admitted. "And if there was some deal on between Gib and this Chop Suey gent who has made prisoners of us on his yacht, why, I suppose, since we snibbed away the iron box of Jint San—whatever it is—Moi Fong has a right to ask us to give it back."

"Take a breath!" advised Bob as his chum finished. "Well, I'm not going to give it back until

I find out what it is. This Chink and Gib took some stuff off the farm at midnight—in the red bag. I'm sure Uncle Tom doesn't know about it and if they're trying to hold out on him I'm not going to stand for it!"

"Me, either!" murmured Ned and Harry in chorus.

"So we'll break away from here if we can," went on Bob, "and get to that iron chest."

"Providing it's still where we left it," said Harry.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, maybe since we were captured some of these Chinks went back in the tunnel and found the chest where we dropped it. That may have accounted for the noise and alarm we heard up on deck."

"Maybe," admitted Bob. "That's a logical explanation."

"Oh, we've got to get out of here—that's all there is to it!" cried Harry. "Come on, let's bust down the door."

He crossed the cabin to pick up a chair to use as a battering-ram when, as he neared a port hole, he looked out and uttered a cry of alarm.

"What is it?" demanded Bob.

"Why, the boat's moving! They've cast off and we're going down the river!"

"You're right!" ejaculated Bob as, with a glance, he confirmed this.

"The slick cheater!" cried Ned. "That's what that noise was up on deck. Getting ready to move away."

"Kidnapping us!" cried Harry.

"That's what it looks like," rejoined Bob. "We're gaining speed, too. See the trees slip past!"

They could observe the scenery on the river bank passing before the open port as if in review and, though they had not noticed the first gentle start of the craft they were now conscious of the vibration of the motor and propeller.

"The high-handed beggar!" cried Harry.

"Let's bust the door!" cried Ned.

Bob raised his foot, being nearest the portals and delivered a hard kick on a panel. At the same time Harry picked up the chair and raised it over his head to bring down on the door. But before he could do this the portal suddenly opened and, as calmly as though making an ordinary entrance, Moi Fong came in.

"Don't let me disturb you," he murmured with ironical politeness.

Harry had been intent on battering the door and had started to swing his chair downward in a hard smash. He was not able wholly to hold back his hand for a moment, as the Chinese stood in the

doorway, and it looked as if the lad were going to strike him.

"Be careful!" hissed the yellow man from beneath his black moustache. And then he shouted something in Chinese.

Suddenly from the dimness of the corridor behind him there sprang forward a veritable Chinese giant—a man within a few inches of seven feet, it seemed. He stood like a protecting wall in front of Moi Fong who rapidly uttered something in his own tongue, ending with the name Wung Goo.

The Chinese giant smiled a smile full of ugly, yellow and black fangs, grunted, and drew from his sash a long, ugly knife.

"Look out!" yelled Bob.

"Don't hit him and start a row!" advised Ned.

Harry was so surprised at the sudden appearance of the big Oriental that he dropped the chair.

Then Moi Fong smiled, motioned for the boys to go farther back into the cabin, and, as they did so he followed, preceded by his powerful guard, who held the long, curved knife as if he meant to use it any moment.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ESCAPE

FOR several seconds the two parties made no move—Bob and his chums on their side and Moi Fong and his giant on the other. Then the master of the *Swan* said gently:

"Suppose you sit down so we can talk this over."

At once there was a lessening of the sharp tension. The boys breathed easier and found seats. With a murmur of Chinese, Moi Fong dismissed his guard and took a chair himself.

"Look here!" burst out Bob, conscious that he was rather weakening his case by speaking first. "We demand to be set ashore!"

"Give me the Jint San and you shall go ashore at once," was the stipulation.

"But we haven't it. I mean we haven't the iron box, if that is what you mean."

"That is what I mean. You had it."

"But we haven't it now!"

"You know where it is!" snapped Moi Fong. "What did you do with it? You must tell me! Where is the Jint San? Oh, you need have no fear of telling me," he went on, appearing to see

Bob and his chums wavering. "I came by the Jint San honestly and after payment of a fair price. You will not wrong the honorable Mr. Gib Toliver by speaking. Where is the Jint San?"

Then Bob did what, later, he said was rather a foolish thing. For in his sudden anger he exclaimed:

"None of your darn business!"

"Ah!" The voice of Moi Fong that had been rather excited as it made the demands became calm and unctious again. "If you take that attitude you give me no choice." Raising his voice he called: "Wung Goo!" and he spoke rapidly in Chinese.

In an instant there glided back into the cabin that same giant and with him were several other Chinese who, without hesitation, began to attack Bob and his chums.

"Come on! Fight! Fight!" cried Bob.

But they hadn't a chance in the world. Though they struggled desperately they were overpowered, while the smiling and inscrutable Moi Fong looked on and in a little while the three captives, more strongly bound than before, were again stretched on the bunks.

"Perhaps you will come to your senses in a little while," said Moi Fong as he stepped out of the cabin, following the last of his men, and locked the door with suggestive loudness.

"Darn the luck!" muttered Bob, struggling against his bonds.

"Rotten!" murmured Ned.

"Maybe we'd better tell him where it is," suggested Harry in a low voice.

"Never!" declared Bob. "I'll beat him yet!"

They discussed their situation at length, but could decide on nothing feasible and were again debating whether it would not be wise to make a compromise, when the door of the cabin suddenly opened and in came Wung Goo, the giant, smiling all over his fat face, while behind him was another Chinese, of normal size, bearing a large tray of appetizing food.

"By golly!" cried Ned, "he's got my number!"

"Going to bribe us!" added Harry with a laugh.

"We can't eat with our hands tied," commented Bob, dryly.

Wung Goo seemed to understand this for he said:

"Mebby so yo' alle time not makee fluss if I take lopes off—can do?"

"All right," agreed Bob, with a look at his chums. "We'll give you our word not to cut up rough as long as we're eating. Take 'em off," and he held out his bound wrists.

"Can do!" chuckled the giant and in a short time the three boys were free, temporarily at least, and began to eat from the tray of food

which contained something substantial as well as some delicacies. The waiter remained near the door and Wung Goo stood guard so there was no chance to escape.

All this time the *Swan* was gliding down the river, and the boys had no idea, now, where they were. They finished their meal, and Ned at least, gave a sigh of satisfaction as the last dish was emptied and then Wung Goo smilingly asked:

"No can do?"

"No can do what?" inquired Bob.

"Alle same tell Jint San?"

Bob took a sudden resolution. He glanced at his chums, winked in a manner that set them puzzling and said:

"Maybe so can do. Tell the boss to come in."

"Alle lite!" exclaimed Wung Goo in what seemed pleased delight. "I tell!"

He came toward the boys holding the ropes he had taken from their wrists (not having removed those from their ankles) and then Bob said:

"Do you have to tie us up again?"

"Must can do," said the giant, firmly. "But you alle same tell boss—no more lopes."

"Well, don't make 'em too tight," suggested Bob with another wink at his chums.

"Can do!" murmured the giant and then, following the example of Bob, who again winked at them, Ned and Harry followed his example of

pretending to feel pain when Wung Goo pulled the ropes about their wrists. By this strategy they succeeded in having their bonds put on much more loosely than before.

Then, when the giant went out of the cabin with his helper, locking the door after him, Bob seemed galvanized into action.

"Quick, fellows!" he exclaimed. "If we work hard we may slip these ropes! Then we can escape! It's our only chance, before Moi Fong comes in thinking we'll tell him what he wants to know. Work fast!"

The ropes were not as easy to get off as they had hoped. But they strained feverishly at them, expecting every moment that Moi Fong would come down to the cabin. But he did not and night had begun to fall when at last Bob exclaimed:

"There! I've got mine off!"

"So have I!" echoed Ned a little later and then the two of them helped Harry, who seemed better trussed than either of them. It was a simple matter to free their feet and once more they were able to move around the cabin.

"What's the game—jump on Moi Fong as soon as he comes in?" Ned asked of Bob.

"I don't know just what is best to do," was the reply. "I'd like to break out of here, but if we try to smash the door we'll make a noise and that will bring the gang down on us again."

"How about through there?" asked Ned pointing to a door in the other end of the cabin. It led to the bath.

Bob opened the door, looked inside and shook his head.

"It's a blind lead," he said.

"But how about that bathroom port?" suddenly asked Harry. "It's bigger than the ones in this cabin. Maybe we could slip out there."

Bob examined the port. Then a ray of hope showed in his face.

"If we could loosen the brass collar that holds the glass in we might do it," he said. "But we'd need a screw driver."

"Here you are!" exclaimed Ned, producing a knife of many blades, one of which was a small, but effective, screw driver.

"Good!" cried Bob and in a short time, working swiftly in the now fast gathering darkness, he had removed the collar and the boys could crawl out on deck. They made an observation first, however, and found that they would emerge in a secluded space, back of the raised trunk of the main cabin.

"Going to jump overboard?" whispered Ned to Bob who seemed to be the natural leader.

"If it isn't too far from shore, and it doesn't seem to be," was the answer, for the banks of the

river could dimly be made out not far away.
"Come on!"

They were about to leap over the rail when there came a sudden jar to the craft and she halted her progress through the water. There was another bump, harder than the first, the boat lost way and swung toward shore. At the same time there arose from her interior confused shouts in Chinese.

"We struck something!" cried Harry.

"Best time in the world for us to escape!" added Ned.

"Come on, boys!" urged Bob.

They were about to leap over the rail, leaving behind them a great confusion on board the *Swan*, when from down below there rushed up a number of dim figures, unmistakably Chinese. They were yelling in their high voices and seemed panic-stricken. There was no sign of Moi Fong.

"They'll never miss us!" chuckled Harry.

"Look!" suddenly cried Bob, pointing to the motor room companionway. Smoke began rolling up from it—smoke that bore the ruddy reflection of flames!

"We're on fire!" gasped Ned. "We got loose only just in time!"

"You said it!" agreed Bob. "But we won't have to jump overboard."

"Why not?" asked Harry.

"The boat's veering to land. We're going to pass right under a lot of those overhanging trees close to shore. As we go under grab a branch and swing clear. No need of getting wet!"

"Atta boy!" murmured Ned.

The *Swan* was now gliding close to shore, either because she was steered that way or because the collision had sent her. This the boys did not stop to figure out, but, as the craft passed under some big, drooping willow trees they grasped the overhanging branches and swung clear, letting the boat glide beneath them.

As the stern passed them, and only a few feet below them, they looked down and saw Moi Fong vainly trying to turn the wheel to steer the boat away from shore. He looked up and saw his prisoners escaping. For an instant rage swept across his face. Then he smiled blandly and with a wave of his yellow hand called:

"I shall see you boys again!"

CHAPTER XIV

ABOARD THE ARK

LIKE monkeys, Bob Dexter and his two chums clung, for a few moments, to the branches of the willow trees while the boat swung out from shore and disappeared down the river. Whether the fire amounted to anything the adventurers could not discover. They were satisfied to be free.

"Well," remarked Bob when the craft was out of sight around a bend, "he didn't take a pot-shot at us, anyhow."

"I was afraid he might so I hid in the branches as well as I could," observed Ned.

"I guess he wouldn't have shot at us," said Harry.

"Why not?" Ned wanted to know. "He's a desperate Chink—look what he did to us!"

"Yes, I know, but he doesn't want to kill us until he gets out of us where we hid the Jint San—whatever that is."

"Well thought of!" commented Bob. "And his words, about seeing us again, seemed to indicate that he hopes to do so."

"He won't; not if I see him first!" commented

Ned. "But say, let's get out of this. I'm tired of hanging here."

"Yes, work your way to shore," advised Bob. "It isn't far and when you get close enough let go and drop into the water if you have to. It isn't deep."

This they found out, after travelling along as best they could from branch to branch. Beyond wet feet they suffered no damage and a little later were in a field bordering the river.

"Well, here we are," remarked Ned.

"Any idea where?" Harry wanted to know.

"Hard to tell," came from Bob. "That boat was travelling pretty fast and we might be fifty or a hundred miles below Midvale."

"It's a strange country to me," admitted Harry, and his chums said the same.

"What time is it?" Ned asked and Bob, gleaming his flashlight on his watch, announced it was about midnight.

"Well, what's the next move?" asked Ned, and he and Harry looked to Bob. For he was the leader of this strange adventure. He had found the cave which was the starting point.

"Are we going back to Tolliver's house?" Harry inquired.

"Eventually, perhaps," Bob said, and he appeared to be thinking the matter over. "But just now we don't know where it is. And I'd like to

get to the bottom of this affair before we show up there. If we go now, with the mystery half solved, we'll have to answer a lot of questions that may give our own game away and then we'll lose the chance of digging it out ourselves."

"We'll stick with you to the last bell," declared Ned.

"Sure!" agreed Harry. "But we can't stay here all night. I'm wet!"

"So am I!" announced Bob, "though that's nothing to complain of. But we can walk along and dry out while we're looking for a place to stay over night. There must be a town somewhere around here and it must have some sort of hotel even if they have to put three of us in one bed. So let's hike!"

"Hike it is!" exclaimed Ned.

They got up from where they had been seated on some stumps in a clump of trees growing in the field bordering the river and, making sure they had in their pockets their personal possessions, such as some money and their flashlights, they started off. For a while they tramped in silence and then, as was inevitable, they began discussing their recent adventure aboard the boat.

"That Jint San must be a very valuable treasure to make Moi Fong take such chances as he took with us to get it," said Ned.

"That's how it struck me," agreed Harry.

"I'm afraid it will be nothing but some heathen idol," was Bob's opinion. "I don't mean to say that isn't valuable to a Chinese, but as for any real value it just isn't."

"But Moi Fong said he paid Gib good cash for it," objected Ned.

"That's so!" Bob had to admit. "And if Gib sold it fairly, and by some chance we got it away from the Chink, I suppose we'll have to give it back. But I'm going to make sure Uncle Tom gets his whack out of this Jint San, or the money paid for it."

"Don't you think Uncle Tom was in on the deal?" asked Harry.

"No, I don't. I think Gib was working on the quiet to do his brother out of his share of the treasure. Well, we've got it now, or we know where it is, and we can force Gib to whack up."

"That is we know where it is if it hasn't been taken out of the tunnel where we left it," corrected Harry.

"Oh, I fancy it's there yet," Bob answered. "One thing is sure, Moi Fong doesn't know it's there, nor do any of his men. And I don't believe anybody else in Midvale knows about those caves and tunnels. I believe the Jint San is safe where we left it."

"Well, the next thing is to get back there and

see," suggested Ned. "Fellows, we may be a long, long way from home."

"But we'll get there in time," added Bob.

They hurried along, their wet feet and legs gradually drying out under the influence of the warm, night wind and they were beginning to wonder when they would see the lights of some town, when Bob, coming to an abrupt halt, asked his chums:

"Do you fellows hear anything?"

Ned and Harry listened intently and the former said:

"I think I hear something like an auto coming along behind us."

"Yes," agreed Harry. "I hear it, too."

"Then let's wait until it catches up to us and maybe we can get a ride," proposed Bob. "I'm dog tired."

"Boy, you said it!" ejaculated Ned.

"And how!" murmured Harry.

They drew to one side of the road and waited. The moon, which had been obscured by clouds, now shown brightly and by its gleam they soon saw, coming around a bend in the road, a strange vehicle.

It was built in the form and shape of a Noah's Ark, patterned after one of those wooden toys, filled with wooden animals, of which children are so fond. There was a sloping, double roof, a

chimney, doors, windows and a platform fore and aft, the two ends being finished in a sort of upward tilted bow and stern of an ancient ship. On the front end sat an old man, with a long, white beard. Truly he might have taken the moving picture part of Noah. But he handled the steering wheel as Noah never could have done.

Surprised at the strange sight, the three boys stood motionless at the side of the road, as plainly revealed in the moonlight as was "Mr. Noah" and his Ark. And, seeing the three wandering adventurers, the driver of the odd vehicle brought it to a stop near them with a shrill protest of brakes and, bowing his venerable head, welcomed them with:

"Hello, boys, are you hungry?"

It was such an odd greeting that, for the moment, they did not answer. But without waiting for it the old man went on:

"And do you want a lift?"

"Yes to both questions," said Bob with half a laugh. "We're looking for some place to sleep as well as eat."

"Then come aboard the Ark!" invited "Mr. Noah," as the boys temporarily christened him. "I can provide you with food and beds."

Hardly knowing whether or not to believe him, they looked on in surprise as he slowly ran the auto to one side and, reaching behind him, turned

a switch which at once brilliantly illuminated the whole interior.

Then the boys saw that the semblance to the ancient Ark was more pronounced. For it was a veritable travelling house that had halted near them. The windows were draped with bright curtains and through the casements could be seen a combined living apartment, dining and bedroom. Bunks were arranged around the walls and in the middle of the floor was a table, set with dishes and cutlery, and, what is more, food. For a centrepiece there was a large roast chicken, and to the amazed eyes of the boys it sent up steam, showing that it was hot from the oven. And to their nostrils was wafted a most appetizing aroma, in which coffee mingled.

"Pinch me!" murmured Bob to his chums. "I must be dreaming!"

"It can't be real!" sighed Harry.

"It is! I've pinched myself and I'm awake!" declared Ned.

"Come in, boys, and eat!" invited the patron of the Ark. "And when you have eaten you may rest. Come on board!"

Hardly knowing what it was all about, the boys ascended some steps at the rear of the vehicle, being led there by "Mr. Noah" who dismounted from the front seat. And as they entered the Ark

they were more and more convinced of the strange reality of everything, including the roast chicken.

"Oh, boy!" murmured Bob.

"What I can do to that!" whispered Harry.

"A little of the white meat and plenty of stuffing and gravy," stipulated Ned.

"Mr. Noah" threw back his head, stuck out his white beard and laughed heartily.

"I thought I'd surprise you!" he chuckled. "Sit down. But wait a moment. There is one condition attached. You must first partake of this!"

With a rapid motion he opened a wall cupboard and set on the table a bottle, containing some dark liquid, and three glasses. In an instant Bob and his chums drew back as Bob said coldly:

"Thank you, we don't drink!"

"Oh, but you will drink this!" said the old man and there was both entreaty and command in his voice.

"Nothing doing!" said Bob, firmly. "Come on, fellows!"

He turned and was about to leave the Ark, but the old man caught him by the arm and cried:

"Stop!"

CHAPTER XV

IN THE JUNGLE

FOR a moment the three adventurers, following the trail of the mysterious Jint San, began to believe they had fallen into the hands of some strange fanatic as unscrupulous as Moi Fong. But the old man, seeing their bewildered surprise and indignation again put back his head, which caused his beard to stick out in front of him and chuckled gleefully.

"Don't misjudge me!" he exclaimed when his mirth had subsided. "I know what you are thinking. You aren't the first. This is no intoxicating appetizer, though it is destined to increase the appetite and the desire for food. Look! Smell! Taste!"

He held the uncorked bottle beneath Bob's nose and that youth had an aroma something like a sarsapilla soda, only stronger. The old man poured some of the liquid out in each of the three glasses, got a fourth for himself and then said:

"Drink hearty!"

"But what is it?" asked Bob, still hesitating as did the others.

"Merely a harmless but effective concoction of roots, barks and herbs. I make it myself. See here!"

He showed the label on the bottle.

TAYTON'S TONIC

"I am Dr. Tayton," he went on with a courteous bow. "I make a good living by going about dispensing this tonic. But I'm not trying to sell you any," he quickly added. "You are my guests. It is free to you. Take it and then eat!"

"Is it safe?" asked Ned.

"Safe! Ha! I see! You doubt, and naturally. But look!" exclaimed Dr. Tayton, and quickly pouring himself out a double dose he quaffed it, smacked his lips and made an inviting and entreating gesture to the boys.

"Well, here goes!" said Bob, with apparently desperate determination and he emptied his glass. Ned and Harry watched him anxiously, but Bob made no wry face.

"How was it?" asked the old man.

"Good!" exclaimed Bob.

"I knew you'd say so!"

"It makes that roast chicken smell better than ever!" went on Bob.

"Ha! I knew it! Increases the appetite; doesn't it?"

"If mine needed an increase it does," admitted Bob. "But I'm hungry enough as it is."

"Well, if you gentlemen will partake," went on Dr. Tayton, motioning to Ned and Harry, "we will start to eat."

"Go ahead, fellows, drink!" urged Bob. "It's good!"

Thereupon Ned and Harry took their medicine and both declared it gave them a pleasant sensation of warmth and made them hungrier.

"Then draw near and dine!" invited their host. "But first there is another formality. Come this way!"

The boys looked at one another somewhat apprehensively. What new ritual was about to be enacted? Wonderingly they followed their host to a little apartment back of the main one in which was the table with the inviting meal. This room seemed a sort of combined laboratory and kitchen, and in one corner stood a weighing scale.

"Step on it, please," requested the doctor and Bob, seeing that he did not slangily mean for him to hurry, got on the scale platform whereupon the old man carefully noted the lad's weight.

"Now you," and he nodded at Harry who went through the same performance as did Ned. And then Bob, seeing their host smile, ventured to ask:

"What's the idea?"

"Simply this," replied Dr. Tayton. "I guarantee my tonic to increase the appetite. What does an increase of appetite mean? More food; doesn't it? And what does more food mean? An increase in weight; doesn't it?"

The boys could but nod in assent.

"Then," went on "Mr. Noah," with a smile, "if I weigh you before you eat and weigh you afterward, the gain shown will be a direct testimonial to the efficacy of my tonic, and I am going to ask you to be so good as to sign certificates to that effect."

He took from a small desk near the scale some blank forms which announced to those concerned that the undersigned, after having taken one (or more) doses of TAYTON'S TONIC had gained (blank) pounds and ounces.

"Best form of testimonial in the world!" chuckled Dr. Tayton. "Now we'll put it to the test. Let's eat! I have a hungry feeling myself."

He led the boys back to the dining room of his Ark, taking with him the unfilled, blank testimonials, the object of which was apparent to all. But the fact that they had to sign their names to the amount of weight they gained did not at all deter the boys from eating heartily. Nay, rather, it made them eat the more. And the food certainly was good. Ma Tolliver could have set no better table.

"Do you do your own cooking?" asked Bob, when he was on the verge of stopping, for he could hold no more. He saw no sign of any wife or other female about the Ark.

"Of course," answered Dr. Tayton. "I cook as I drive along the road."

"Whew!" whistled Ned. "That's going some!"

"You must be a magician," said Harry with a smile.

"Not exactly. I use a fireless cooker. I start my food on a gasoline stove, get the stones heated that retain the caloric energy after the stove is shut off and then I put my meal, from soup to nuts, you might say, in different compartments in the cooker. The heat in the stones does the rest and I can drive along knowing that when I want to stop everything will be done to a turn with no danger of burning. This meal you have just eaten was started about sunset and I was hoping to meet with some wayfarers with whom I might share it when I saw you boys."

"Mighty glad you did!" commented Bob.

"I wouldn't have missed this for a lot," went on Ned, loosening his belt.

"It went right to the spot!" added Harry.

"Well, if you have finished," remarked the queer physician as the boys sipped the last of their fragrant coffee, "will you kindly weigh yourselves again and let me fill in the amount of increase."

They complied with his harmless whim and each lad was not a little astonished to find he weighed over a pound more than before the meal. They had really eaten that much, and small blame to them.

The figures were put in the spaces provided for them on the blanks, the boys signed them and then Dr. Tayton, waving his hand toward the clean, inviting bunks against the wall said:

"Slumber when you please."

The boys were quite ready to turn in, for they had been through a strenuous day and night. But their curiosity was not quite satisfied. Ned remarked:

"That tonic of yours certainly gives an appetite."

"Sure!" murmured Harry.

"You must sell a lot of it!" added Bob.

"Sell it?" cried the old doctor, starting back in what seemed surprised horror. "Sell it! Hippocrates forbid!"

"Why," went on Bob a little nonplussed by this. "You said you made a good living from it and——"

"A *good* living, yes, but I did not mean by that I *profited* by the sale of my tonic. I meant it did me good and helped me to right living by dispensing it."

"Well, if you don't sell it——"

"Look here!" exclaimed the old man impulsively, "if you had a secret which would benefit mankind and help cure ills, would you hold it to yourself, or refuse to part with it unless paid?"

"I don't know as I would," Bob confessed.

"Well, that's my case exactly. I have discovered a tonic for suffering humanity and as I have enough money to live on I go about giving it away. It is my hobby, my chief delight in life. I give it away—when I can induce people to take it," he added a bit pathetically.

The boys could well believe that many, approached with an invitation to drink of the tonic would, naturally, refuse. They, themselves, were rather hard to convince, harmless as they now knew the concoction to be.

"Yes, few will believe me," went on the old man. "Look, I have many bottles on hand," and, opening another wall cupboard he showed it filled with phials of the dark liquid. They were kept from falling out, as the Ark journeyed, by slats across the shelves.

"But enough of my troubles," he went on more cheerfully. "You have dined, well and amply I hope, and after food should come rest. If you will lie down you may sleep as I journey on."

"Where are you headed for?" asked Bob.

"Where do you want to go?" countered Dr. Tayton.

The boys were rather in a quandary. They did not want to go back to Gib Tolliver's until they had done more toward solving the secret. Yet they felt they ought to be near the cave where the Jint San in its metal box was hidden. So, Ned and Harry leaving it to Bob, that young detective said:

"We were sort of headed for Midvale."

"That place will suit me as well as another," said Dr. Tayton. "To Midvale we shall go, though it is many miles from here," he added, thus confirming what the boys thought, that they had come quite a journey down the river in the motor boat.

"We're in no hurry," said Bob.

"Then to bed!" cried the odd physician. "I shall drive on through the peaceful night."

He seemed rather a spiritual old man, imbued with a harmless desire to make the world better, though he took rather a queer way of doing it.

"A nice, harmless, old nut!" Harry decided and his chums rather agreed with him.

But at any rate the Ark was a haven of refuge and they were in distinctly a better position than being prisoners on the Chinese boat. Also they were in a fair way to getting back to the tunnel and its caves of secrets.

So, thanking their lucky stars they had met Dr. Tayton, they took off their clothes and, for the

first time in what seemed nearly a week, got between clean sheets on soft beds.

"Oh boy, will I snooze!" murmured Ned.

"Don't call me! Let me awake naturally!" begged Harry.

"This sure is restful," agreed Bob.

"Breakfast will be ready when you awaken," said the old man with a noiseless chuckle as he went out to the driver's seat. "I shall travel through the night."

And soon, lulled by the motion of the Ark, the boys slept.

The morning sun was streaming in through the curtained windows of their bunks when they roused and, for a moment or two, they could not remember where they were. Then, suddenly, they heard voices outside the Ark, which had come to a stop. Nor were the voices friendly. There was a snarl of menace in them.

"Come on, Santa Claus!" one man's rough voice challenged. "Open up and spill out some of the booze."

"Sure! We're dry!" added another.

"Booze! Booze!" repeated Dr. Tayton with righteous anger. "Why——"

"Aw, come off! Youse ain't puttin' nuttin' over on us!" sneered another. "We've heard about youse an' we're wise, see! Pass out some booze!"

"We jungle cats need a drink!" cried some one and there was a laugh.

Bob and his chums peered from their windows as they lay in the bunks. They saw that the Ark had halted on a country road opposite a dense growth of trees, bushes and weeds.

In the distance was a railroad water tower and in a flash it came to Bob and his chums what was meant by reference to the "jungle." The men who had halted the Ark, or who had swarmed out of their camping place when the vehicle halted, were hoboos of the worst sort; railroad tramps, who hopped freights and other trains that stopped for the engine to be watered at the tank. Their rendezvous in the woods was the "jungle."

The boys saw the crowd of dirty, ragged, unshaved tramps coming closer about the Ark. From Dr. Tayton's voice they judged that he was on the front seat.

"I stopped here to do you men good," he was saying. "But if you demand as a right what I give as a favor——"

"Aw, cut out de chin music an' pass de booze!" a red-whiskered tramp shouted.

"If youse don't we'll help ourselves!" cried another.

Suddenly the Ark lurched as though the hoboos from the jungle were boarding it and the old doctor cried out either in fear or alarm.

"Come on, boys!" cried Bob, leaping from his berth. "We've got to take a hand in this!"

CHAPTER XVI

GILLY MUZZLEWIG

PAUSING only long enough to pull on their trousers and tuck into the waistbands thereof their shirts in which they had slept, Bob, Ned and Harry hurried out of the main compartment of the Ark into a little vestibule behind the driver's seat. The outer front door was closed, but Bob pulled it open.

Then the boys beheld the second act of the little drama, the opening scene of which they had witnessed from the curtained windows of their bunks. Half a dozen dirty, burly tramps were swarming on the steps and fenders of the Ark, up towards the driver's seat where Dr. Tayton sat at bay, a fearless but rather defenseless old man.

A tramp from the jungle, his hideous red whiskers blowing in the morning breeze, was trying to pull the old man off the seat.

"Chuck him in de frog pond!" called a tall, thin hobo.

"Git him down offen dat band wagon so's we kin grab some of de booze!" suggested another.

"Off you come, Santa Claus!" sneered the red-

whiskered ruffian as he braced himself to pull loose the grip Dr. Tayton had of the side rails of his seat. "Soft an' easy does it!"

But by this time Bob was in position to deliver a telling blow, full on the bewhiskered chin of the hobo. The red beard acted as a cushion, like a boxing glove, for Bob's hand, but did not soften the effect on the tramp. Bob gave him all he had which was considerable. It was a blow straight from the shoulder and the tramp, with a surprised look on his bloated face, slumped backward and down off the platform into the road where he lay quiet and motionless.

"One down!" cried Ned, at the same time aiming a blow at another hobo trying to climb over the mudguard. Ned hit a glancing blow and the fellow slumped down.

At the same time Harry was disposing of one on his side, and Bob, stepping in front of the doctor, who seemed surprised at this sudden appearance of reinforcements, cried:

"Beat it, you bums!"

But the "jungle cats," were not so easily intimidated. As the red-whiskered one Bob had knocked down and out began to revive, several of his pals gathered to make a second attack.

They swarmed up over the wheels and guards but the boys were in a good defensive position and they took advantage of it, making every blow

tell. They knew how to box, which few if any of the tramps did, and though some tried to use their fists, landing some blows on the boys, the latter had by far the best of the argument.

However, the fighting was fast and furious now and as more tramps came running out of the jungle Bob and his chums began to feel a little dubious about the outcome.

As for Dr. Tayton, he seemed so surprised that he could take no part in the melee, from which, however, his age, naturally, barred him.

"Don't antagonize them, boys!" he pleaded as Bob managed to get him off the seat and into the vestibule-like space back of it. "I'll give them some bottles of my tonic if they want it. But they must not call it booze! That isn't right."

"Don't give 'em a thing!" cried Bob.

"Except this!" shouted Harry, landing an effective blow on the tall, thin hobo who had suggested the frog pond.

"Here's another!" yelled Bob, knocking to the ground a colored tramp whose open mouth showed horrible, yellow fangs.

"There's a lot of 'em!" remarked Ned, dubiously as the unkempt clan gathered for another rush.

And then, suddenly, there came an interruption in the shape and figure of a very fat hobo, who fairly waddled out of the vine-covered tunnel that

seemed to give entrance to the denser fastness of the tramps' jungle. As his eyes, still heavy from sleep, took in the scene he loudly called:

"Stow this fighting, you lazy lubbers! Back to your bunks or you'll reckon with the captain! Keel haul my mizzen stays! What port do you think you're going to make, anyhow? You'll be flying distress signals if the bulls get wind of this! Sheer off! Oh, scuttle butts, there goes my best bower!"

This last was almost a wail of anguish as the boys, whose memory, struggling with surprise, held them spellbound, gazed at the tramp the fat figure of whom, clad in a long, frock coat, suddenly seemed to bulge a little at the middle. A large, white, pearl button came flying through the air and landed with a thud on the seat back of Bob.

"In the name of the Jint San, here he is again!" murmured Harry.

"I thought I remembered that voice," murmured Harry.

"The button busting stranger of the night," spoke Bob.

But the fat tramp, paying, for the time, no heed to the boys, continued addressing the members of his clan.

"See there, you inconsiderate lubbers, what you made me do!" went on the commanding one. "All because I had to blow up my wind bag to keep you from going from the jungle to jail. There's

alliteration for you—jungle and jail! Ha! All is not lost! I still have some wit. But my best bower is gone. Save that button, I pray thee my friend," he murmured, looking at and addressing Bob who had picked it up. "I will sew it on anon. As for you minions——"

He looked severely at his abashed followers who seemed to be slinking away and then, as he took another long breath there was a second popping sound and a second button sailed through the air.

"A malediction upon my lee scuppers!" the fat tramp cried. "I shall soon lose them all! Did you see where that one went?" he asked the boys.

"Over in the weeds," Harry answered.

"Gone forever!" sighed the fat tramp. "But what is going on here?" he demanded rather than asked.

"Your bums attacked us!" snapped Bob.

"My bums! You do me too much credit, fair sir," and he started to bow mockingly but evidently thought better of it when he considered his buttons.

"I don't care whose bums they are, you'd better call them off, though!" warned Bob. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"I? Pardon that I have no card, but I am—Mr. Muzzlewig, at your service. Mr. Gilly Muzzlewig," and this time he could not refrain from

bowing, which was instantly followed by another popping sound and a button flying through the air.

CHAPTER XVII

OUT OF THE CLOTHES

While the name of Gilly Muzzlewig meant nothing to the boys, the voice and appearance of this strange being connected definitely with the night their adventures started. They were sure he was the man they had seen near the entrance to the tunnel. Bob did not know whether it would be wise or not to question him and behind the circumstances. But, for the moment, the boys had no chance to put any inquiries as Mr. Muzzlewig waved his hand interrogatively at the lads and suggested: "May I have the honor of your names?" "I am Mr. Alexander Tynon," replied the old man promptly. "The inventor and discoverer of Tynon's Tonic. And these are my guests," he introduced the boys in turn. Bob was debating whether this was a wise procedure but it was too late now. However, Mr. Gilly Muzzlewig appeared to attach no importance to the names, and there was no reason why he should. "You are travelling for your health, I take it,"

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"You are travelling for your healths, I take it,"

suggested the fat tramp whose language, stilted and forced as it was, seemed to indicate that he had fallen below his station in life.

"For the healths of others!" said Dr. Tayton, quickly and he at once produced a bottle of his tonic and dwelt at length upon its virtues, urging not only Mr. Muzzlewig but the now subdued tramps to approach and partake of the medicine.

But at the mention of the word medicine the hoboos seemed to melt away as the dew was vanishing before the rays of the rising sun so that soon only the fat tramp was left.

"You will try some of it, will you not?" begged the old doctor, and he was almost pathetic. "You look like a fine subject," he added. "I believe you could sign a most convincing testimonial as to weight. Will you have a bit?" he shook the bottle invitingly.

"Will I?" questioned Mr. Muzzlewig, a smile playing over his fat face. "Try me, doctor!"

"It isn't exactly what you think!" chuckled Bob, speaking in a low voice. "But it will give you an appetite."

"As if I needed one, forsooth! But pour the ambrosial nectar, my good sir," he begged the doctor and when he had quaffed the tonic he smacked his lips and asked:

"What is the next act?"

"To eat!" exclaimed Dr. Tayton. "I shall at

once prepare breakfast. But first I must weigh you."

"Weigh me?" murmured the hobo, and he looked wonderingly at the boys, for the doctor had hurried inside to get one of his testimonial blanks. Bob explained the whim, Mr. Muzzlewig at once fell in with it, and allowed himself to be tested on the scales.

"I think my gain will surprise you," he remarked smilingly to the old physician.

"I count on you as an earnest disciple," said Dr. Tayton.

"My word! What a delightful place!" exclaimed the fat hobo when he had been led into the interior of the Ark. "So complete and—er—nourishing," he added as from the kitchenette back of the main room there came a sound of frying eggs and ham, the odors of which mingled with fragrant coffee.

Dr. Tayton was already preparing breakfast on his gasoline stove and the boys, falling in with the travelling picnic idea, set the table while Mr. Muzzlewig, seeing at hand the wash stand with soap and water, craved permission not only to take a partial bath but to shave, which he did with a razor he carried with him.

He was quite a different looking tramp when shaven and with his locks combed, if not shorn, he sat down with the half amused boys to break-

fast. And though the lads declined any more of the tonic they ate none the less for lack of it. As for Mr. Muzzlewig his appetite was simply enormous and when he was weighed, later, he had added several pounds to his testimonial which the eccentric doctor regarded with pride and satisfaction.

There followed a period of rest after the meal and as the tramp and the doctor were sitting out on the rear "deck," so to speak, smoking like pals of long standing, Bob and his chums discussed what was best to be done.

"He's the same button-busting fellow we saw that night," said Harry.

"Sure he is," agreed Bob. "But what good to speak of it? He didn't go down in the cave."

"We don't know about that," Ned remarked. "He may know something of the Jint San."

"Well, let's size things up a bit before spilling any of that part of the mystery," decided Bob. "Let's wait until we get back to Midvale and see if the box is where we left it in the tunnel."

It developed, after a general talk, that the old doctor intended to travel about the countryside in his Ark, giving away his tonic to such as he could induce to try it. He would be going in the general direction of Midvale, he said, they being then distant about seventy-five miles from it. So the boys decided to remain aboard as it was the easiest and

most pleasant means of travel they could have found.

"And will you come with us?" invited the doctor to Mr. Muzzlewig. "Unless your forest fastness calls you," and he smiled and waved to the clump of trees.

"No, I am not tied to that particular jungle," said the tramp. "Those unfortunate but pathetically dirty chaps, over whom I have so easily gained the ascendancy, will do as well without me. I like this present company and the surroundings much better. Yes, thank you most kindly, I shall cast my lot in with yours."

"And when we get a chance," Bob whispered to his chums, "I'll ask him what he was doing so near the tunnel hole that night and if he knows anything about the caves."

"And the Jint San," reminded Ned.

"And the iron box," added Harry.

"Oh, sure," Bob agreed.

Then followed two delightful days of traveling in the Ark. Dr. Tayton would not allow his boy guests to defray any expenses of buying food, though they offered. While Mr. Muzzlewig's offer to go out and work for the price of a couple of chickens at some farm was, likewise, turned down.

"I am doing what I am doing for the good of humanity," said the kind, genial old doctor. "Do

not detract from my effort to gain merit by offering to help. I have plenty of money."

They slept and ate in the Ark, and despite his rather at first unprepossessing appearance Mr. Muzzlewig proved a most delightful traveling companion. He had been in many countries and had read much. He was, naturally, clean, once he had removed the jungle grime, and he was quite a fanatic in the matter of spotless handkerchiefs, possessing three which he washed at least twice a day, drying them in the sun and pressing them by the simple method of folding them and sitting on them with his great bulk.

"A portable mangle," he explained to the boys.

They rightly sized him up as a talented man who had gone down hill because of drink. He admitted having been an actor and also a sailor both of which calling the boys had already guessed.

The long, frock coat of Mr. Muzzlewig was at once pathetic and ridiculous. It was too small for him by many inches and his increasing girth made it impossible for buttons long to remain sewed upon it. As he insisted on keeping it tightly fastened about him, the least exertion, or too strenuous breathing, would send the buttons flying.

The strange tramp retrieved as many as he could, and those lost he replaced by a supply from his pocket. These he sewed on with a needle and thread from a housewife kit he also carried,

though in an emergency he often caught his coat about him with bent pieces of wire picked up along the road, he said.

Finally, after another day of pleasant travel, during which Dr. Tayton gave away many bottles of his tonic, the boys found themselves within a few miles of Midvale. Desiring to approach in a less public manner than riding in the Ark, they took their leave of the kind, old physician and prepared to walk into town.

"And if you have no objections, I think I shall go with you boys," offered Mr. Muzzlewig. "I love the open road. I am not averse to walking, though to ride with you has been a pleasure."

He bowed courteously to the physician and added:

"I really need the exercise!" and in the chuckle that followed he burst off another button, which, luckily, Bob caught. It was the same big pearl affair that seemed to be the pride of its owner's heart.

"I owe you a thousand thanks!" murmured Mr. Muzzlewig as Bob handed the button to him. "Why do I not learn to control my emotions?" he asked of no one in particular.

Bob and his chums were rather pleased, than otherwise, that the queer tramp had decided to come with them. For there were certain questions they wanted to ask him about the tunnel and the

Jint San. Though Bob felt rather certain Mr. Muzzlewig had no information on this latter subject.

So that afternoon, having taken leave of the proprietor of the Ark, the four set out along a country road leading to Midvale. Just what they would do when they got there the boys did not know. They had said nothing to the tramp about Gib Tolliver.

They were crossing a broad meadow, as a short cut to a highway which they knew was also a short cut to the town when they were startled by the sudden throbbing and whirring sound of an aeroplane. They looked up and saw, almost upon them, a passenger monoplane. The pilot had evidently been gliding silently down, and had thrown on his switch again, thus starting his motor.

Down out of the clouds swooped this craft, and as it neared the earth the lone occupant of the cockpit leaned over and shouted a warning as again he cut his ignition.

"Keep back! Keep back!" he cried. "I'm going to land just there! Keep back out of the way!"

CHAPTER XVIII

GETTING A CLUE

THE shout of warning came just in time, for, so silent had been the advent of the plane, before the motor started up again, and so near had the boys and Mr. Muzzlewig been to the very spot where the machine came down, that only a few feet separated the adventurers from the place of landing. The wind of the descending plane actually fanned their faces.

"Whew!" whistled Bob, leaping back with the others. "That was a close call!"

"Too close for comfort!" ejaculated Harry.

"They ought to have air traffic lights here!" grumbled Ned.

As for Mr. Muzzlewig, he had taken a long breath after making his leap for safety and, as he now expelled it, his sudden increase in girth sent a button flying.

"Watch it, boys!" he begged, and Harry saw where it landed.

"Greetings, fair sir!" called Mr. Muzzlewig as the pilot of the plane, having taxied to a perfect stop and swung the craft around until it headed

for the boys, alighted as it halted. "Well met," he added as the pilot shoved his goggles up on top of his leather cap, revealing him as a youth about the age of Bob and his chums.

"Not so well," was the answer. "Hope I didn't scare you fellows too much," he went on. "I didn't see you when I first started to come down. The field appeared to be free and clear and you suddenly stepped out of a little hollow right in my path. So I had to yell at you."

"Good thing you did," commented Bob.

"Is this your regular landing place?" asked Harry.

"Gosh, no! I was forced down. Broken oil pipe and I'm in the dickens of a fix! This is my first trip for the concern I'm working for and to make a flummox of it isn't going to stand me in any better with the boss."

"What's the matter?" asked Ned.

"Nothing much, and yet I daren't keep on with the pipe broken."

"They can't blame you for that," suggested Bob.

"Oh, they will, don't worry. I'm flying for the Commercial Airways and they've lately put on an express service between Ludville and Fenport. It's been going mighty well, big advertisement and all that. Now I'm loaded with a lot of valuable

packages that I've got to deliver in Benton, and here I am down! Rotten luck!"

"Why, Benton isn't far from here," said Bob, knowing that city to be one within easy distance, considering an aeroplane, of Midvale, and the boys knew they were not far from that town.

"I know Benton is near here," went on the aviator who gave his name as Kirk Dayton. "But this delay is just neough to make me miss connecting with the other plane to which some of my stuff is to be transferred. That's for a distant point. Is there a garage around here?"

"None that I know of," Bob answered, and his chums nodded their agreement with him. But Mr. Muzzlewig spoke up and said:

"Yes, there's one just over those hills."

"Good!" exclaimed young Dayton. "All I need is a piece of copper pipe and a sleeve coupling. Say," he went on, eagerly, "if you fellows wouldn't mind standing guard over my plane, I could hustle to that garage and get what I needed, hurry back here take off and maybe make that connection after all. How about it?"

"Sure we'll do it!" exclaimed Bob.

"Maybe one of us could go to the garage for you, though I don't know where it is," said Harry. And the same thought was in his mind as in the minds of his chums—that it was strange Mr. Muzzlewig should know where the garage was.

But then he had probably tramped much in that part of the country.

"Thanks a lot," spoke the aviator. "But you wouldn't know just what kind of a piece of pipe I'd need. If the garage has any I could spot it in a second, bring it back here and make my own repairs. Or I can bring the garage mechanic back with the right stuff and he could help. I don't want to leave my plane unguarded, though there doesn't seem to be anybody around here who would take anything."

He looked about the deserted country. In spite of the fact that a plane had made a forced landing, not one curiosity seeker had come to the place. The territory in the immediate neighborhood was either sparsely settled or none had observed the plane. Yet from the fact that Mr. Muzzlewig had spoken of a garage nearby, it would seem to indicate that there was a town not far off.

"All right then," went on the aviator. "If you'll just stand by my plane I'll skip off. Which way do I go?" he asked the hobo actor.

"Head for that old tree," was the answer and one on the brow of a hill was pointed out. "You'll see a little village from there."

The pilot set off on a run leaving the adventurers to look at the plane until he returned. The airship was a large one, with a sort of cabin back of the pilot's cockpit, designed to carry passengers,

it seemed, for through the celluloid windows could be seen several seats. Piled among them were many express packages.

"I guess," said Bob, "this is a passenger plane they're using temporarily for express service."

"I'd like a ride in the bus," remarked Harry.

"So would I!" exclaimed Ned.

"What, trust your life to one of those frail things!" cried Mr. Muzzlewig. "Never!"

"I've been in smaller planes than this," Bob said.

"The one we saw come down the day—the day we were up in the vineyard—was a lot smaller than this," said Harry. He had been about to say "the day we discovered the tunnel," but changed it.

"Oh, that plane!" remarked Bob, and there suddenly came into his mind this part of the strange mystery remained also to be solved.

The boys and Mr. Muzzlewig were so interested inspecting the plane left in their care, the boys especially admiring many new features, that in what seemed a very short time the aviator was back, coming over the fields in a battered flivver with a garage mechanic. They had brought some spare parts with them and the repairs were soon completed.

"Much obliged to you," said young Dayton, when the mechanic had departed and the plane

was ready to take off. "If you were going my way I'd give you a lift as far as Benton," he said.

"As it happens we're going to Midvale," spoke Bob, "and that would be quite a lift on our way. However Mr. Muzzlewig won't ride in a plane, so——"

"Who said I wouldn't ride?" cried the tramp.

"Why, didn't you?" asked Bob in surprise.

"Well, I 've changed my mind. Is there room for all of us?" he asked, with seeming eagerness.

"Plenty," answered the pilot. "This is a ten-passenger plane, and they're only using it for express work until they can get some regular carriers made. If you'll get in and push some of those bundles out of the way you'll have room and to spare. I want to go over everything and see that I won't have to come down again. I can just about make it by crowding speed a bit," he added, looking at his watch.

The entrance to the cabin of the plane was through a door in the side, and while Ned, Harry and Mr. Muzzlewig were putting the express packages in a pile, thus making four seats available, Bob stood talking to the aviator who was checking over his oil and gas lines and supply, looking at the ignition system and making positive the feed pipe repair was in good shape.

"I had a queer experience the other day," said Bob. "My friends and I were on a hill and we

saw a small plane come down in a field. But when we ran there, a few minutes later, there wasn't a sign of it."

"What did it do—poke a hole in the ground and pull the hole in after it?" chuckled Mr. Dayton.

"That's what I've been wondering about," said Bob. "Is there a plane small enough to be hidden in—say a cave?" He was hoping for some clues to the mystery and developing some new ideas.

"There are some very small planes," the pilot said. "The French have one that hardly seems big enough to take a man up in it. Yet it will hold two and it can quickly be taken apart and stowed in a very small space. The wings are removable, the fusilage collapses and the engine is small but powerful. Take off the wings, propellers and fold up the fusilage and you could stow that plane in there," and he motioned to the interior of his own machine.

"That must have been one of those planes," Bob said. "But why they would want to hide it I can't guess. You say they're made in France?"

"Yes, and I understand several have been sent to China. They seem to have made a hit there."

"China!" exclaimed Bob and there was a startled and surprised note in his voice. Parts of the strange puzzle were beginning to fit together. Yet many things remained to be explained.

"Well, I guess we're ready to hop off!" announced young Dayton as he made sure everything was in order. "Are you ready?"

"Let's go!" called Bob.

With Harry, Bob and Mr. Muzzlewig and Ned in their seats, the pilot operated the self-starter, the propellers spun with ever increasing speed, the plane taxied across the field and then, with a roar of power, took the air.

"We're off!" cried Ned, enthusiastically.

"Yes," grimly observed the hobo actor, "we're off the earth." For it was rapidly dropping away from them as they could see from the cabin windows.

Bob felt that he had obtained a valuable clue. He determined to make a search in the cave not only for the box containing the Jint San but also for a demountable plane hidden in some recess.

CHAPTER XIX

A STARTLING DISCLOSURE

ONCE the plane was well up in the air, and had gathered speed, the sensation of flying was enjoyed by the boys, and even by Mr. Muzzlewig, who declared that he was quite enthralled by his first venture.

"Had I know it was so delightful I would have had me a plane long ago," he remarked, and his manner and voice were hardly in keeping with his ragged attire. He assumed such a serious air, as though ordering a ten or twenty thousand dollar air craft was merely a matter of instructing his secretary to draw a check for the amount, that the boys smiled at his whimsicality.

Suddenly, as they were flying along, the plane seemed to hesitate and then began a rapid descent to the earth now far below them.

"Is she falling?" cried Bob.

"Where do you keep the parachutes?" asked Ned.

"Do I have to jump?" exclaimed Mr. Muzzlewig.

"Take it easy!" called back the pilot, a grin on

his oil-besmudged face. "We just struck an air-pocket, that's all. They're nothing!"

"I should hate to strike *something*, then," grimly remarked the tramp.

But the aviator skilfully brought the machine out of what really was no danger and they flew along until, out of the mists and clouds below them, having passed over several towns and villages, they came within sight of the Benton air-drome.

"There's where I land," said the pilot to Bob, who sat directly behind him. "Sorry I can't take you boys any farther."

"It's far enough for us," Bob said. "We can easily walk on to Midvale."

"What a wonderful ride!" murmured Mr. Muzzlewig as the plane came down to earth in a silent, gentle glide. "It hardly seems started before it ends. You may quote me as saying," he went on gravely as though his opinion carried weight, "that I fully approve of your machine, Mr. Dayton."

"Thanks!" chuckled the aviator.

A little crowd gathered to watch the landing, but as planes came and went from the airport several times a day there was not much curiosity. Mechanics ran out to take charge as the pilot left his seat and other men began transferring the packages of express matter. The presence of the

boys and the tramp appeared to excite no comment, and from the talk of several pilots who gathered around Kirk Dayton, listening to his story of a forced landing, the boys concluded it was not uncommon for the airmen occasionally to take passengers for a ride.

"See you again some time, boys," the pilot said as the three and Mr. Muzzlewig started off the field. "Thanks for your help."

"Thanks for the buggy ride!" chuckled Bob.

"Really, I must order one of those," murmured Mr. Muzzlewig, turning to get a final view of the plane as he and his new friends started off toward town.

They walked along a country road, discussing their recent adventure until Bob, turning to the tramp asked:

"Are you headed for any place in particular?"

"Why, no," was the answer. "But if you are tired of my company——"

"Of course we aren't!" Bob made haste to say. "What I was getting at was this. We plan to go on to Midvale, and——"

"Ah, your homes are there, perhaps," and he seemed to speak wistfully, as though he lacked a home of his own.

"No, we don't live there," Ned remarked.

"Just summering there," added Harry.

"But I thought," went on Bob, "that if you had

no other objective you might care to come with us."

"Might as well go there as anywhere," said the tramp, carelessly.

"Then you haven't any special object in going there?" asked Bob quickly, and this was the question he had been leading up to.

"A special object in Midvale? Why, no! What could it be? If I go there with you it will be the first time I have set foot in the place, or perhaps I should say feet, seeing I have two," and he chuckled.

"I hardly think so, Mr. Muzzlewig," said Bob, with a meaning look at his chums.

"Think what, my dear sir?"

"That this will be the first time you have been in Midvale."

"You must mistake me for someone else," said the tramp, and he looked sharply at the boys. "Though it may well be," he admitted, "that I have passed through the place unwittingly, for I have been tramping—lo! these many years, it seems," he finished wearily.

"Look here, Mr. Muzzlewig!" exclaimed Bob taking a sudden determination. "I may as well tell you what is in my mind—and in the minds of my friends," he nodded at Ned and Harry. "There's a queer mystery in Midvale, beginning with an aeroplane and ending with a strange iron chest

containing the Jint San, and you seem mixed up with it, for we saw you near the entrance to the caves and tunnels."

Mr. Muzzlewig was so surprised, or pretended to be, that he had to sit down on a big rock beside the road. From that vantage point he looked from one youth to the other and then took a long breath. But before breathing out he loosened his coat, a most unusual proceeding, and, thus relieved of pressure, all the buttons stayed on.

"Let me get this straight," he said in a low voice. "You say I am mixed up in a mystery?"

"A very strange mystery," stated Bob. "Here's the story."

Aided by Ned and Harry who supplied parts that Bob, in his eagerness and excitement, omitted, the tale was told to Mr. Muzzlewig, from the sighting and disappearance of the areoplane, to the chase in the tunnel, the capture aboard the *Swan*, the escape from that boat, the advent of the Ark and the trip in the commercial plane.

"You astound me!" exclaimed Mr. Muzzlewig, and there was no mistaking the reality of his emotion. "Things certainly happened to you boys!"

"They did," agreed Ned, simply but emphatically.

"But what about you?" asked Bob. "Can you tell us anything about that tunnel?"

"I? Why, no!"

"But you were on the point of going down in it one night."

"Never!"

"Yes, you were," and Bob detailed the circumstances.

Slowly a light of remembrance dawned over the face of Gilly Muzzlewig. He appeared to be mentally thinking backward, at the same time "counting on his fingers," as children do. Then he frankly exclaimed:

"You are right! I was in such a place as you describe and at night. But I had not the faintest idea a tunnel, with such a strange mystery, was so near. I give you my word of honor!"

He was quite different, now, from the careless, happy-go-lucky tramp, and the boys could not help believing him.

"Yes, I must have been there," he said in musing tones. "I journey here and there, I consort with tramps, hijackers, and I doubt me not, with worse gentry, yeggs, murderers and all sorts of ruffians," he murmured. "At times I long to get away from them and then I wander afield of nights. It must have been on some such occasion that I passed so near where you were hiding, but unwittingly, may it please you. I had no knowledge of either you or the cave."

"No, we were pretty well hidden," said Harry.

"And you could hardly find that tunnel entrance if you didn't know where to look for it," added Ned.

"Then you can't throw any light on the mystery?" asked Bob in disappointed tones.

"Not yet. But suppose we talk it over. Let's get to a quiet place and go at this with a system. I may be able to help you."

This was a new phase to his character.

They walked on toward Midvale, found a secluded spot in a grove of trees back from the road and sat down to talk. The tramp asked many questions and at last inquired:

"What did you plan to do next?"

"Well," said Bob, "we thought of going back to the tunnel to see if the Jint San—whatever that is—might still be there."

"Which it must be unless Moi Fong has found it," said Harry.

"Oh, that kidnapping Oriental," murmured the tramp, understandingly. "He seems to be a gentleman of resources even if you did trick him. And you haven't seen him since you escaped from his boat?"

"No," answered Bob. "Would you like to come with us down into those caves?"

"I should like nothing better. But you tell me they are quite extensive, that you remained in them a couple of days or more and ate and slept.

Think you that the wherewithal to do the same still remains where you left them—I mean your blankets and food?”

“It’s likely,” Bob said.

“But the grub won’t be any good,” said Ned, mournfully.

“Probably not. So we had best get fresh—if you are in funds?” he suggested, gently.

“Oh, we have money,” Harry stated.

“Which is more than I have, except in a limited amount,” chuckled Mr. Muzzlewig. “But since you have adopted me and I have, in a sense, taken you under my wing, let us adopt the motto of the Three Musketeers—‘all for one and one for all!’ Does that click?” he asked with an air of his old gaiety.

“Sure!” assented Bob.

“Then ho for the caves of mystery!” declaimed the tramp in what must have been his manner on the stage.

Then went on to the next town where they bought some food supplies and then, having gotten fresh batteries for their flash lights they were ready to go on to Midvale and thence to the cave entrance.

“But we won’t go through Midvale and we’ll keep away from Gib Tolliver’s place,” suggested Bob. “We did the disappearing act, and if we

show up it might spoil our chance to solve this mystery."

"That's right," agreed Mr. Muzzlewig. "And now," he added, as they were about to leave the store where they had purchased their food, "if you will excuse me a minute I will return anon. You may wish to talk matters over among yourselves."

Which Bob, Ned and Harry did while the tramp went toward the rear of the store. The boys attached no importance to this, and probably would not have given it another thought except that as Bob suddenly recalled that a package of dried herring would make an additional, tasty item on their menu he went back to the counter to buy it.

As he was getting it he noticed Mr. Muzzlewig coming from a telephone booth in the rear of the store. It was such a surprise to see an apparently homeless, businessless and penniless tramp coming from a telephone booth, where he had evidently been long enough to make a rather lengthy call—judging by his heated appearance—that Bob plainly showed his astonishment. Mr. Muzzlewig, too, seemed nonplussed.

But he passed the incident off until he and the boys were outside the store, talking so rapidly about whether or not they had enough food, that

Bob had no chance to ask a question foremost in his mind. This query was:

"What was Muzzlewig telephoning about?"

But the tramp took matters into his own hands when, as they walked along the quiet road, he suddenly said:

"Boys, you have taken me into your confidence, and it is only fair that I do the same by you."

"What do you mean?" asked Bob, and he guessed that what was coming had to do with the telephone. He had said nothing to his chums about this, as he had no chance.

"Well, boys," went on the tramp, "I have been deceiving you."

"Deceiving us!" cried Harry.

"Who are you, anyhow?" demanded Ned. "Do you know anything about the Jint San?"

"Not a thing except what you have told me, and I agree with the theory of one of you—just who I cannot at this moment recall—that it is a mysterious Chinese idol or god. But my deceit has nothing to do with that. It solely concerns myself. Boys, I am not what I seem to be. You take me for a hobo—a tramp, but I am—a detective!"

CHAPTER XX

PURSUED AGAIN

WITH one accord the boys stopped short in their tracks and gazed at their big, burly companion. He was smiling at them.

"A—a detective!" faltered Bob.

"Whew!" whistled Ned.

"Are you after the Jint San in the iron box?" asked Harry.

"Or after us?" sharply inquired Bob.

"Neither one," Mr. Muzzlewig answered. "I never heard of the Jint San until I met you boys, and my happening to meet you was so much in the nature of an accident that a moment's reflection will prove that I could not have been looking for you."

"That's so," agreed Ned.

"But you're after something; aren't you?" Bob inquired.

"Say somebody and you'll be nearer right," chuckled Detective Muzzlewig, whose manner and talk had greatly changed since his confession.

"Gib Tolliver!" exclaimed Harry. "For trying to double cross his brother!"

"Wrong again!" chuckled Mr. Muzzlewig. "I never heard of Gib Tolliver until you mentioned him. No, boys, I'm after somebody you know nothing about and probably never heard of. It has nothing to do with the mystery you have uncovered or the Jint San. That's as much a puzzle to me as it is to you.

"But, having fallen in with you, and learning that the man I am after is somewhere in this vicinity, I decided to spend a little time on your game to help you search for the answers to a lot of puzzling questions. You caught me telephoning, which I didn't intend to have happen," went on the detective, smiling at Bob. "And since you did, I thought I might as well tell you. I was reporting to headquarters," he added.

"You've got to be pretty slick to keep anything from Bob," said Harry with a chuckle.

"Why so?"

"Because he's a detective himself!"

"Oh, shut up!" warned Bob, but too late.

"Are you, really?" asked Mr. Muzzlewig, interestedly. "Let me congratulate you and——"

"I'm only an amateur," said Bob, modestly.

"An amateur! You ought to hear how he solved the Storm Mountain mystery!" cried Ned.

Then Bob, rather against his will, was obliged to admit that he had done a little sleuthing work,

whereupon, hearing some of the details, Mr. Muzzlewig congratulated him in earnest.

"Well, I shall like to see how you solve this Jint San problem," went on the hobo detective. "I'll help you all I can as I have a few days to spare while waiting for certain developments."

"Hadn't we better get on to the cave and see if those yellow robes and the box of Jint San are where we left them," proposed Ned, as they were proceeding rather slowly.

"Sure!" agreed Bob. "But we ought to wait until after dark to slip into the cave, for we don't want anyone to see us."

"A good idea to cover your trail," agreed Mr. Muzzlewig. "Suppose we find a little 'jungle' of our own to hide in until the shades of night begin falling fast," and he chuckled with something of his old careless manner.

"You're a queer character," commented Bob. "How did you come to dress up like this?"

"And bust off buttons, Mr. Muzzlewig?" added Ned.

"The name is not Muzzlewig, but let that pass," said the detective with a smile. "I won't tell you my real one for obvious reasons. But this character suited me. I might say I have been an actor and I played a tramp part many times. So it came natural but I must confess it isn't pleasant thus associating with dirty bums."

"As for the buttons, I wanted some trait that would make me talked about in the underworld where I am seeking my man, and I adopted that as a fantasy that harmed no one and gave me a talking point, so to speak. Some day you may hear my story which, in a way, is quite as mysterious as your own. But now I agree that we ought to get to our starting point as soon as possible."

Accordingly, they entered Midvale by a seldom used road and slipped into a patch of woods where they remained hidden until dark. Then, carrying their food and some other supplies they had bought, they entered the cave at the point where, Mr. Muzzlewig remembered, he had stood one moonlit night and lost some "valuable buttons," as he called them.

"But I had no idea I was so near a cave," he said as the boys piloted him down into the series of caverns and tunnels. It was rather a tight squeeze for him to enter the hole, but he managed it.

Lights were produced and the boys, now rather familiar with the winding passages, went ahead, aiming to reach the place where they had left the box and the strange garments. On the way they talked over various phases of the mystery, giving Mr. Muzzlewig several details they had forgotten before.

"Have you any idea what it might all be about?" asked Bob.

"Well, I can form a theory just as you can," the detective said. "As for the aeroplane, which began the mystery, that, as young Dayton said, may have been one of those small, French affairs and Moi Fong who arrived in it may have quickly demounted it and hidden the pieces in the caves or tunnels, or somewhere, not too far from where it made a landing."

"Moi Fong?" cried Ned. "Do you think he came in that aeroplane?"

"He might have," Mr. Muzzlewig stated. "As I size it up here is what happened. Your Gib Tolliver finds, in some way, a valuable Chinese treasure in an iron box. He must have spoken of it to your local laundry Chink who, in turn, communicates with some one of his own race higher up. That would be Moi Fong, who loses no time in coming to Midvale—perhaps in an aeroplane.

"Moi Fong seeks out Gib Tolliver who has the Jint San—whatever it is—you see them bargaining in the spring house and then you skip because you think they are suspicious of you being there. Maybe that's right and maybe it isn't.

"Later you boys get into the cave, find the box and the queer garments, you travel around in the tunnel, one of you almost gets blown away, you tote the box and clothes, with your own things, to

where you get out of the cave, and leave 'em just inside. Am I right so far?"

"You haven't forgotten anything of importance so far," said Harry.

"You have a good memory," complimented Ned.

"We detectives must; isn't that so, Bob?" asked Mr. Muzzlewig.

"I suppose so," said the blushing Bob.

"Well," remused the more mature sleuth, "now the question is, or some of the questions are, what is the Jint San and why was the box containing it left in the tunnel where you picked it up? If you ask me I think it has to do with a Tong war."

"A Tong war!" exclaimed Ned.

"You mean like in New York—battles between rival Chinese factions?" asked Bob.

"That's it. It may be that this Jint San, god, idol or whatever it is, belongs to one of two Tongs, or it may be the property of a third and be coveted by two others. Anyhow Moi Fong gets it and either while he leaves it in the cave by accident or intention, another band of Chinese get wind of it and come after it. But you get ahead of them both and take it away, which Moi Fong finds out, so he has his band of Chinese kidnap you, thinking thus to get the treasure. If he bought it from Gib Tolliver that would give him a right to it as far as you are concerned."

"Uncle Tom had a right to share in it," spoke Ned.

"Oh, yes, there is that to be considered," said Mr. Muzzlewig. "You said something, too, about seeing Gib and Moi Fong come in at midnight with a red bag covered with soil. Was that before or after you saw the metal box in the spring house?"

"After," stated Bob. "I think there must be two treasures, perhaps, the one in the box and the one Gib dug up at midnight."

"Maybe both were part of the same treasure," said Mr. Muzzlewig. "But at any rate here we are back underground, or at least it's a second trip for you boys, and where is the Jint San?"

"We haven't come to the place yet," Bob said.

"It isn't far from here, though," stated Harry.

"It seems queer," mused Bob as they hurried along the dark passages, "if Moi Fong was so close after us as to capture us the moment we slipped out of the tunnel, that he or his men didn't find the box where we left it."

"Maybe some members of a rival Tong slipped along close after you boys and picked up the box as soon as you left it," suggested Mr. Muzzlewig. "You didn't go back to look."

"That's so," admitted Bob. "Well, we'll soon be there to see if the treasure has vanished again."

"It's a very juicy mystery," commented the

older detective, "and if I had time——" He suddenly ceased speaking and appeared to be listening intently.

"What is it?" whispered Ned.

"Somebody's coming—behind us!" said Bob in a low voice.

A moment later, looking back, they saw the reflections of lights and flickering shadows fantastically cast on the rocky walls of the tunnel. At the same time there echoed high-pitched, sing-song voices which could come but from one sort of persons.

"Chinks!" cried Harry.

"And after us!" added Ned.

"Hurry!" exclaimed Bob. "Let's get to the place we left the box—ahead of them if we can. It's better than standing now to make a fight; don't you think so, Mr. Muzzlewig?"

"Yes. Let's get to a secure place, if we can, and try and see who are after us. It may be friends of yours."

"Not very likely. We haven't any Chink friends," said Harry.

"It's more likely to be Moi Fong and his gang," suggested Bob.

The sound of shouting and the high voices increased in volume. The flickering lights and grim shadows came nearer and nearer and there was the muffled sound of running feet.

"They're after us!" murmured Ned.

"Out for blood, I guess!" commented Ned.

"And I think they've seen us!" exclaimed Bob as there came a sudden, loud howl from one of the oncoming band. "Yes! There they are!" he added as he looked back and saw some outstretched hands carrying torches. "Come on! Run for all you're worth!"

Once more the adventurers were being pursued through the tunnel. Gilly Muzzlewig raced along with them, maintaining his speed in a remarkable manner for one so bulky. And as he ran Bob heard him murmur:

"There goes another!"

A button fell tinkling to the rocky floor of the tunnel.

Behind them came the pursuers, yelling loudly.

CHAPTER XXI

DOWN IN A HOLE

MR. MUZZLEWIG did not stop to pick up his button. Neither did the boys halt to help him look for it. This was no time to delay with that howling mob after them.

They flashed their electric torches occasionally to show the path along which they were racing, not daring to keep them going continuously for fear of betraying their whereabouts to the Chinese. And these occasional gleams of light did not make for easy or safe progress. More than once each member of the party collided rather severely with the sides of the tunnel.

"Hope you chaps know this road!" panted Mr. Muzzlewig, whose breath was now issuing in wheezes.

"Pretty well," Bob assured him. "We've been along here before."

"Think we can give 'em the slip?" asked Ned.

"Hope so," commented Harry. "They must know we're here, anyhow."

"I guess there isn't any doubt of that," commented Bob. "They must have seen us come in

here or they may have been hiding and waiting for us. Anyhow they're chasing us."

"And I don't like that tune they sing," muttered Ned as, even while they hastened on, they caught faint echoes of the howling of the mob behind them.

"They're excitable chaps, these Chinese," said Mr. Muzzlewig. "But if it comes to a clash I may be able to help you by talking to them. I know something of the language. I used to be on the New York police force and my beat was around Doyer and Pell streets."

"In Chinatown," remarked Bob.

"Exactly! Queer place!"

"The trouble may be, though," said Harry, "if we stop to talk to them and tell them, through you, that we haven't the Jint San, they may fight us first and listen afterward."

"There's always the danger of that," Mr. Muzzlewig admitted. "So it would be a good thing if we could reach some strategic point where we can hold them off until we can talk matters over and convince them we haven't what they are after. Is there such a place, and are you sure you are going the right way?" He slowed up his exhausting run.

"Oh, yes, this is the right way," Bob said, as he flashed his light on the walls of the tunnel looking for familiar marks. "And in a little while we'll

come to a sort of cave, opening out of a branch tunnel. We can slip in there and hide."

"Won't the Chinks after us do the same thing?" asked Mr. Muzzlewig.

"Not unless they know where to look for it, and the chances are they don't," replied the young detective. "It isn't easy to locate unless you know about it."

"Well, the sooner we get there the better," commented the masquerading hobo.

"Listen!" suddenly advised Ned.

They stopped, shutting off their lights and strained ears in the darkness.

"What did you think you heard?" whispered Bob.

"I thought that yelling had stopped," spoke Ned. "No, there they come!" he quickly added as echoes of the shrill voices floated to them from the depths of the tunnel.

"Come on!" cried Bob, and once more they ran.

Bob was in the lead now, looking for a certain projecting rock that marked the entrance to the side cave of which he had spoken. In a few minutes he came to a stop and called:

"Here we are! Inside, everybody!"

His electric torch showed what seemed to be merely a wide crack in the wall, and when Mr. Muzzlewig saw it he exclaimed:

"I never can get through there!"

"It's bigger than it looks, on account of the shadows," said Bob. "Come on—squeeze in!"

A trial proved that even the portly detective could get his body through and soon all four were within a cave which widened out from the side gallery of the tunnel along which they had been running. The entrance was so well concealed that only someone knowing about the location could ever find it.

"I think we'll be safe here," remarked Bob.

"Unless they have better luck than I wish them," commented Ned.

"Whew!" panted Mr. Muzzlewig. "I'd like a drink of water or even some of Tayton's Tonic! I'm all in!"

"There's a spring a little farther on," spoke Harry. "I'll get you a drink."

With his torch Harry located the bubbling water of which they all partook and felt refreshed. They recovered their spent breaths and Bob, going cautiously back near the entrance to this cave, listened to see if their pursuers were coming.

"Can't hear a thing," he soon reported.

"Then we gave them the slip!" chuckled Ned.

"Or else they weren't after us," commented Bob.

"What do you mean—not after us?" demanded

Ned. "Didn't we hear them howling on our trail like a lot of wild Indians?"

"Yes, they were chasing somebody," Bob admitted, "for I don't believe even a band of fanatical Chinese would race along a dangerous tunnel like this just for fun. But I was thinking, since what Mr. Muzzlewig told us about rival Tongs, that maybe the wrong party is in possession of the Jint San, and the ones we thought were after us were really after another gang ahead of us."

"That's very possible," commented Mr. Muzzlewig.

"It's all very queer," said Harry. "And I think when we find out all about it, if we ever do, that we'll get a big surprise."

"Oh, we'll find out about it!" declared Bob confidently. "And now, since we are here, apparently safe from pursuit it would seem, let's decide what's the next best thing to do."

"Eat!" suddenly came from Ned.

"You couldn't have had a better thought!" chuckled Mr. Muzzlewig. "I'm of the same mind."

They lighted some candles to save their flashlights, opened the food they had bought at the country store and ate a substantial, if not very fancy, meal. For they had to depend on canned goods and had no means of making coffee, the

portable stove being with their baggage at the end of the tunnel where they had left the iron box.

"But it's the best meal I've had since we ate roast chicken with Dr. Tayton in the Ark!" said Ned with a sigh of gratification.

"You said it!" echoed Harry.

They washed down their food with water from the spring and then began to discuss their situation. Mr. Muzzlewig said:

"I think the first thing we ought to do is to explore this cave a bit farther, to see where it goes and ends. We may be in a blind pocket and if those Chinks get in here behind us there's be no way for us to escape. That is unless you fellows have been to the other end."

"No, we haven't," Bob admitted. "It will be a good idea to see where we are."

He took his torch, which was the most powerful, and led the way toward the farther recesses of the cave in which they had hidden. He passed beyond the spring, which was the farthest point they had gone to on a previous visit, the others following a short distance back of the young detective.

Suddenly Bob's light was seen to move rapidly in an arc as though he had waved his hand. Then it disappeared while his voice cried in despair:

"I've fallen into a hole!"

CHAPTER XXI

RIVAL TONGS

DESPAIR and fright, for a moment, held the others motionless as they realized what had happened to Bob. And then Harry cried:

"We're coming, old man!"

There was no answer from the lad who had disappeared.

"Bob! Bob! Where are you?" shouted Ned.

"Come on—with your lights—but be careful!" warned Mr. Muzzlewig as he walked forward.

Then, suddenly, out of the darkness that lay ahead of the rescuers, came a faint voice calling:

"Mind your step! Don't fall in as I did!"

"He's alive, anyhow!" murmured Ned.

"Where are you?" asked Harry, anxiously.

The combined lights were now flashing along the floor of the tunnel and soon revealed a gaping hole, yawning and black.

"He must be down there," spoke Harry and his voice was tense.

"Yes, I'm down here, and you needn't whisper—I'm not dead yet," called Bob from the black depths.

"Are you hurt, Bob? Are you in deep?" cried Ned, as they all went to the edge of the hole.

"I guess I'm not hurt much," was the reassuring answer, "and it isn't so very deep. I fell on a lot of soft stuff—dried leaves and sticks that high water must have left here for a good many years. It was like falling on a pile of hay. Only I banged my head against the side wall as I tumbled, and went out cold for a minute. Dropped my flashlight, too, so I can't see."

"We've got light enough!" called Mr. Muzzlewig, cheerfully, and by the gleams of the other torches they made out Bob in a crumpled heap on the bottom of a hole about six feet deep.

"Anything broken?" Ned inquired.

Bob moved and began to get up, carefully so as not to do himself any damage in case there were bones broken. But he had no great pains aside from those caused by bruises and bumps and when he stood up Mr. Muzzlewig said:

"We'll soon pull you out of that. Reach your hands up so we can get hold of them."

"Wait until I find my flashlight," answered Bob. And when he had located it near his feet, undamaged though it had jarred out, he switched it on and gave a sudden cry.

"What is it—snakes?" gasped Ned who had a horror of reptiles.

"No! But look! The Jint San! The treasure box!" fairly yelled Bob.

There at his feet, half buried in the debris that had been swept into the tunnel of the ancient water course, was the missing, mysterious box the boys had left, and last seen at the egress of the underground cave.

"Well, what do you know about that?" gasped Harry.

"Sure it's the same box?" cried Ned.

"The very same," answered Bob as he bent over and examined it more closely.

"Well, I should say you were in luck," commented Mr. Muzzlewig. "So this is what the mystery is all about; eh? Can you pass it up or do you need help?"

"I'll lift it up if you'll grab hold of it," Bob said and this was soon done. When the box was safely out of the hole Bob was pulled up by raising his hands which were clasped by his companions above and, after making sure he had sustained no injuries, he gathered with the other adventurers about the strange iron chest.

"What do you make of it?" Bob asked the detective as he carefully examined the box by means of a flashlight. Bob reflectively rubbed the back of his head.

"Hurt?" asked Ned, sympathetically.

"Got a nasty bump—about as big as a hen's egg."

"Too bad!" murmured Harry.

"Oh, I'm all right," Bob hastened to assure them. "I'm anxious to see what's in that chest."

"Something of value, I should say," commented Mr. Muzzlewig. "The Chinese wouldn't go to the trouble of locking something up as tight as this is locked, unless it was worth a lot. It may be something of value only to them—like a Joss or an idol, but it's something."

"Not very heavy," remarked Harry, lifting one end of the box.

"That's what I've been thinking from the first," said Bob. "It's lightness impressed me."

"Well, a golden idol, studded with jewels, wouldn't be very heavy," said Mr. Muzzlewig. "The only thing to do is to get this box open."

"And I say," came from Harry, "let's get out of this tunnel and have the box forced, if we have to. I've had enough of this underground life."

"Yes, I've had enough, too," commented Bob, rather dryly as he gently rubbed the lump on his head.

"Well, it isn't far from where we came into this side tunnel, back to where we left our stuff when we got out near the river and were kidnapped," Ned remarked. "Let's go there and get out."

"And we'll go straight to a blacksmith and

have this box opened," decided Bob. "It's time we solved this mystery."

"Step on it!" advised Harry.

They decided, in view of having found the box, that it would be a waste of time further to explore that particular part of the tunnel. So they retraced their steps, meanwhile speculating on how the chest had come where it was found—down in the hole.

"Some of the Chinks hid it there," declared Bob and it seemed a reasonable supposition.

They halted and listened when they got back to the crack through which they had entered the side tunnel to conceal themselves. Then, hearing no sounds, they decided that the Chinese had left that region, and they stepped out.

In about half an hour they reached the V shaped crack which, they knew, gave on the bank of the river. There they found all their possessions, except the Chienese garments. Of course the box had been taken (by whom they did not know) but they now had that.

"Guess what grub we left is spoiled, though," remarked Ned, rather ruefully.

"We'll soon be eating in the open," Bob said. "But look here!" he exclaimed as they came close to the opening. "It's dark—night!"

"That's right!" agreed Ned and Harry.

"We haven't been in here as long as you

thought," chuckled Mr. Muzzlewig. "It's the same night we came in, but I think it will soon be morning. And, rather than go blundering around outside in the dark, I think we'd better camp here until daylight so we can see what we're doing."

It was good advice, and the boys followed it, though they were anxious to get outside and have the mysterious box opened. At last the gleams of daylight began to filter through the crack and never was a sight more welcome. They slipped out, taking their valises and the iron box with them, and stood on the bank of the river, stretching, for they had all dozed while waiting in the tunnel.

But Bob suddenly ceased in the midst of a magnificent yawn to gasp with surprise and point down the stream.

"Look!" he cried.

Chugging up was the same motorboat from which the boys had escaped and on her stern, at the wheel, was the inscrutable Moi Fong.

"He said he'd see us again and he's kept his word!" said Harry.

The boat suddenly swung in toward shore and at that moment there came rushing out from the woods a band of Chinese in American clothes. They were shouting and yelling. At the same time there came leaping up on the deck of the boat a rival gang, evidently summoned by Moi Fong,

who shouted something in Chinese and pointed to the Orientals on the bank.

"Maybe they haven't seen us and we can slip back and hide!" suggested Bob.

"Too late!" exclaimed Ned.

They saw Moi Fong pointing at them from his boat. At the same moment the band of Chinese swarming from the woods also saw the adventurers on the river bank near the tunnel entrance.

There came a fresh burst of yells from both parties of the rival Tongs, for such they seemed to be.

"There's going to be a fight!" cried Bob.

"And we're going to be in the middle of it if we aren't careful!" exclaimed Harry.

Suddenly Wung Goo, the giant Chinese on the boat, drew a revolver and fired. There was an answering shot from the yellow men on shore.

"The battle begins!" cried Bob, grimly.

CHAPTER XXIII

GNARLED ROOTS

UNABLE, for the moment, to decide what to do, Bob and his companions stood there in the small trees and bushes on the bank of the river, looking from the excited band of Chinese on the *Swan* to the equally enraged band on shore. And above the riot of shrill yells and revolver shots Ned cried:

"What shall we do?"

"Beat it!" was the succinct advise of Mr. Muzzlewig. "We've got a chance to escape back into the tunnel with the box before these Tongs attack us or each other. Quick! Pick up the box! I think they haven't seen it yet and we can hide it again!"

The box was out of sight in a clump of weeds.

"Lively's the word!" cried Bob. He dropped to his hands and knees and began to crawl toward the tunnel entrance, pushing the iron box ahead of him. Harry helped him and soon they were all in the cave again.

"That was sharp work!" gasped Bob as he sat down on a rock near the mysterious chest of Jint San.

"Are they coming after us?" asked Harry of Mr. Muzzlewig who had been the last to crawl in.

"Can't tell yet," was the answer.

"Hadn't we better barricade that hole?" asked Ned.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea," agreed the hobo detective. "Roll some of these rocks against the widest part of the crack."

This they did, with feverish haste while to their ears came faintly the sounds of yells and shots indicating that there was a Tong war going on outside, in the outskirts of peaceful Midvale.

"They're at it hot and heavy," commented Bob.

"Wonder what caused those two bunches of Chinks to meet when and where they did?" mused Ned.

"Might have been accident, might have been arranged," said Mr. Muzzlewig. "They may have met by agreement to fight it out for the possession of the Jint San—which we have, or one party may have been trailing the other and just have come together. One thing is pretty sure—I don't believe they counted on seeing you boys—that is either party."

"We certainly didn't send Moi Fong, or either Tong, any word that we were coming," chuckled Bob. "Though he did say he would see us again as he caught us escaping off his boat. Well, we're here, anyhow."

"And how long are we going to stay?" asked Harry.

"We've got to consider that," Bob stated.

"I think we'd better get out of here while the getting is good," observed Ned. "Let's go to a blacksmith and have him open that box."

"But not Si Wright in Midvale," objected Bob, as he realized his chums, in their eagerness to solve the secret, would, naturally, go to the nearest smithy.

"Why not Si's place?" asked Harry.

"Because it's on the main street."

"That's so—we might meet Gib," agreed Ned.

"There's a good deal of truth in that," commented Mr. Muzzlewig. "So, not to put too fine a point upon it, let's get out into the open and see what's in the box."

They gathered up their belongings, Bob and Harry carrying the strange chest between them, and hurried back to what they regarded now as the main entrance to the caves, tunnels and maze of passages. This entrance was the one they had entered the night before with Mr. Muzzlewig. They had not been able to locate the hole by which Bob and his chums first entered the secret place, and of course to emerge at the river was now out of the question.

So finally, with the treasure safely in their possession, they again came out of the tunnel. They

made an observation, first, but saw no one around the hole in the little hollow. A glance down toward the Tolliver farmhouse showed no sign of life there. And they were now far enough from the river to prevent any sounds of the strife there from reaching them.

"And where shall we go to have this box opened?" asked Ned.

"To Hank Biddle's blacksmith shop over in Radford," answered Bob. "I happen to remember he's there. When I was up here last year he fixed my fishpole reel for me. And there's not much chance of meeting Gib in Radford."

Radford was a small town over the hill from Midvale and the boys were soon on their way thither, Mr. Muzzlewig going with them. If Mr. Biddle was surprised when asked by this rather disheveled party of adventurers, old and young, to file open a strange, iron box, the blacksmith gave no sign of it. He merely grunted, got out his tools and set to work.

There was rather a lengthy rasping of steel on iron, until the last, thin scrap of the metal hasp was filed through above the padlock and the cover could be tilted back.

Eagerly the boys and Mr. Muzzlewig peered forward to see of what the strange treasure might consist. There was a covering of red paper over

the contents of the chest—red paper with strange, black, Chinese characters sprawling across it.

Bob raised this and, as he did so, a faint, and rather pleasant aroma, floated out into the blacksmith shop. The boys expected to see some quaint, fantastic, Chinese idol or Joss, perhaps carved from jade or moulded from solid gold set with jewels. But all that met their eyes was a mass of gnarled and twisted roots, some with soil still clinging to them—a pile of small roots filling the box almost to the brim.

"Roots!" gasped Bob in surprise.

"Nothing but roots!" added Harry, running his hand down to the bottom.

"Licorice roots!" groaned Ned. "Fellows, the joke is on us! For once Bob's detective abilities don't amount to a hill of beans!"

Hardly knowing what to say, Bob picked up some of the roots and looked more closely at them. He smelled the strange aroma and was about to cut one with his knife when, from outside the smithy, a well-remembered voice was heard intoning:

"Without charge! Free and gratis! For the benefit of all mankind! Take it and welcome!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE JINT SAN

BOB DEXTER and his chums rushed to the smithy door, there to behold what their ears had warned them to expect.

"The Ark!" cried Harry.

"Old Doc Tayton!" echoed Ned.

"There can't be two so it must be the same one!" chuckled Mr. Muzzlewig.

It was, indeed, the quaint and picturesque Ark and its venerable proprietor and it remains to be settled who was the more surprised, Dr. Tayton or his former traveling companions, at this unexpected meeting. There was a small crowd of persons about the quaint conveyance and to them the old physician was passing out bottles of his tonic. Many seemed to know and welcome him.

"Well, where did you come from?" Dr. Tayton asked Bob and his chums when the distribution was over.

"We have been traveling," answered the young detective.

"Even as I have," commented the tonic dispenser. "But you seem to have some object here," he

went on as he looked in the smithy and saw the iron box on a bench.

Then Bob had a flash of inspiration.

"Maybe he'll know what these roots are," he said to his chums. "He uses barks, herbs and roots in his tonic. Maybe he can solve this part of the mystery for us."

"Let him have a try," suggested Mr. Muzzlewig.

Thereupon, each one adding a part, the boys and the hobo detective told their strange story to which Dr. Tayton listened attentively. At the conclusion he murmured:

"So the box was filled with roots?"

"Queer, twisted, gnarled roots," said Harry.

"Forked, some of them, like the letter Y," added Bob who had noticed this peculiarity.

"Forked!" cried Dr. Tayton. "Let me see them!" He seemed to attach much importance to this.

Quickly the roots in the box were shown him and he picked them up, smelled them, tasted one and exclaimed:

"You have, indeed, a treasure here!"

"A treasure!" cried Bob.

"In these old roots?" asked Harry, disbelief in his voice.

"Licorice roots!" murmured Ned.

"No, not licorice roots!" exclaimed Dr. Tay-

ton, "though they have a faint resemblance to them in odor and taste. But these are the roots of that rare plant—ginseng."

"Ginseng!" exclaimed Bob. "Gin—seng!" And then, as he said this once or twice he suddenly changed it to "*Jint San!*" and exclaimed: "That's it! That's what Moi Fong was saying—ginseng—jint san!"

"They are the same," assented Dr. Tayton. "The latter pronounciation would be as a Chinese would say it in English. A treasure, indeed my friends."

"But what is ginseng or jint-san?" asked Harry.

"The Chinese name for *Aralia quinquefolia*, or American ginseng," answered Dr. Tayton. "It is a valuable remedy from a Chinese standpoint though I would not use it in my tonic. A Chinese physician, though, would count himself the most fortunate of men had he this supply. And I have a friend, who manufactures an elixir, who would use this if he could. Dr. Tosh is his name. He practices in the west. Out among the cowboys Old Tosh, as he is affectionately known, has done a great deal of good with his elixir. It cannot, of course, compare to my tonic, but it is fair—fair."

In passing I might say that Old Tosh, a quaint character, plays an important part in some other books, those of the Boy Rancher series. He

helped them solve some strange secrets among the cattle rustlers around Diamond X ranch.

"Then all our treasure seems to be in ginseng roots!" murmured Bob, who seemed much disappointed.

"But that is treasure enough," declared Dr. Tayton. "It is difficult for us to realize how highly the Chinese esteem this ginseng, or Jint San, as they call it. As a medicine it is almost as devoutly worshiped as are their ancestors. And its money value is not small."

"Then what's this box of roots worth?" asked Harry.

"I can only make a rough estimate," was the answer. "But in times of scarcity, when, say, there is a small crop in Korea and Manchuria, where the plant flourishes best, outside of the wild variety in this country, the roots sell for hundreds of dollars an ounce."

"An ounce!" exclaimed Bob. "Don't you mean *pound*?"

"No, I mean *ounce*!" declared Dr. Tayton. "I don't say that this is worth five hundred dollars an ounce, but it is very valuable, especially if there is a shortage in China as often happens, and as would seem to be the case now, since these Chinese you spoke of made such desperate efforts to get this box."

"Figure even a hundred dollars an ounce," said

Bob, musingly, "and at sixteen ounces to the pound, not bothering with drug-store weight now, there must be more than ten pounds of roots here and that's——"

"Sixteen thousand dollars!" exclaimed Harry, who was quick at figures.

"A hundred dollars an ounce is a conservative figure," spoke Dr. Tayton. "I have heard of it selling at four times that."

"Four hundred dollars an ounce!" gasped Ned. "Hot dog!"

"So it's some little treasure chest you found," remarked Mr. Muzzlewig. "I must congratulate you, fellow sleuth!" he smiled at Bob.

"Oh, the others did as much as I," said that youth, modestly.

"Where did these roots come from?" asked the old physician.

"Off Gib Tolliver's farm, somewhere," Bob answered. "And I suppose, now that we know all about the secret treasure, we'd better take it back to him or Moi Fong."

"You won't have to take it to him," chuckled Harry, who had gone to the door of the smithy.

"Why not?"

"Because here comes Gib down the road now in that old flivver of his. There are a couple of Chinks with him and I guess there's going to be some fireworks!"

CHAPTER XXV

END OF THE MYSTERY

GRIM and silent, flanked on one side by Moi Fong and the giant Wung Goo, and on the other by Soy Ting, the Midvale laundryman, Gib Tolliver descended from his flivver and approached the boys standing out in front of the blacksmith shop. The box of ginseng roots was inside.

"Well," and Gib's voice was a snarl, "a pretty kittle of fish ye got me int', ye boys did!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Bob.

"Jest that! Nice goose-chase you bin leadin' us! You an' that other bunch of Chinamen!"

"What about your bunch of Chinese?" asked Bob, pointing an accusing finger at Moi Fong.

"What right had you to kidnap us?"

"I really must apologize," said Moi Fong suavely. "It was all due to a mistake—several mistakes, I suppose."

"Was locking us in your cabin and trussing us up a mistake?" asked Harry.

"No, I did that intentionally, being led to do so by a mistake, however," and Moi Fong smiled.

"I felt I had a right to the box of Jint San I had

bought," and he spoke the word almost reverently. "Where is it?" he asked eagerly.

"In there," and Bob nodded towards the smithy.

"Better git 'em, Mr. Fong, 'fore anythin' else happens t' 'em," suggested Gib Tolliver, grimly.

"One moment!" exclaimed Bob as the Chinese started into the shop. "Are you selling those roots to him, Mr. Tolliver?"

"I've already sold 'em to him an' got my pay!"

"Where they yours to sell?"

"Why, in course they were!" cried the farmer, wrathfully. "I dug 'em up in my gully patch. Sure I owned 'em!"

"But do you know what those roots are worth, Mr. Tolliver?" asked Ned.

"Not t' a penny, but Mr. Fong an' me, we agreed onto a price an' I'm satisfied. He wants 'em more'n I do an' I never see a thing yit I wouldn't sell if I got my price!"

"But those roots are worth four hundred dollars an ounce!" cried Bob.

"Excuse me, my dear young man, not in the present market," broke in Moi Fong. "But I paid Mr. Tolliver the actual present value, which is sufficiently high to give him a handsome profit, since the Jint San," again he spoke almost reverently, "cost him nothing."

"But look here!" exclaimed Bob. "Half the

farm belongs to Mr. Tolliver's brother, Uncle Tom. Does he get his share?"

"Of course he does!" declared Gib. "I didn't let him into the secret until I was sure of my money, but he knows now. An' what in 'tarnation got int' ye boys, anyhow?"

For the first time, since the beginning of their adventures, Bob and his chums felt rather cheap. It had turned out so unexpectedly.

"What was ye up to, sneakin' in th' house, takin' your things out an' not lettin' any of us know where ye was!" went on Mr. Tolliver.

"I guess we made some mistakes, too," chuckled Bob.

"How did you happen to trace us here?" asked Harry.

"My hired man happened t' see ye comin' out of a hole in th' ground a little while ago," said Gib, "an' it was easy enough t' find ye'd come this way. So I got hold of Mr. Fong an' follered."

"Excuse me," murmured Moi Fong, "but I am anxious about those roots. I paid a large sum
——"

"Here they are—all safe!" exclaimed Bob, leading the way into the blacksmith shop. "And if it's all the same to you I'd like to hear all about this mystery."

"Huh! 'Taint much of a mystery!" chuckled Mr. Tolliver. "Not so much as ye made of it."

"But it might have been serious," said Ned. "Those Chinese shooting at us back near the river."

"Neither my men, nor the others are good shots," said Moi Fong, smiling easily, "and I might say that none of the weapons discharged by my men contained bullets. I cannot answer for Lui Chang," he added stiffly.

"Who is Lui Chang?" Bob wanted to know.

"The head of a rival Chinese company who also sought the Jint San," was the answer.

"This is getting worse and more of it," murmured Harry. "Let's start at the beginning."

"Wa'al, in th' beginnin'," stated Gib Tolliver, "one day I happened to dig up some of these roots in what I call my gully patch. I was after sassafras to make some tea for my wife.

"I stuck these ginseng roots in my pocket, not knowing what they were, and forgot about 'em until I happened to pull 'em out when I was in Soy Ting's laundry one day gettin' my shirts, for my wife was laid up an' couldn't iron 'em. Soy almost went crazy when he saw an' smelled 'em, and he managed to make me understand that they was wuth a lot of money. He said he'd tell a friend of his in New York about 'em, an' he did. He wrote to Mr. Fong."

"And I came as soon as I got word," added the Celestial merchant. "For I knew of the scarcity of

Jint San and how valuable my countrymen in China would regard these."

"Did you come in an aeroplane?" asked Bob.

"Yes."

"Well, for cats' sake what became of it?" cried Harry.

"It was a small machine, of a new kind, easily taken apart. To keep my secret as much as possible, my friend and I," and he nodded at the Chinese giant, "took the plane apart and hid it under some bean poles in the field where we landed."

"And to think we saw that big stack of bean poles and never dreamed of looking there!" cried Ned.

"I thought maybe it might be hidden in the tunnel," said Bob. "But go on, please, Mr. Fong." They were losing some of the animosity they had once felt toward him.

"Well," resumed the merchant, "I went up to meet Mr. Tolliver, as we had agreed by mail, and I saw the roots he had in a box he kept in his spring house."

"Did you wear a yellow robe?" asked Bob.

"Yes," assented the Oriental. "It may have seemed strange to you, but we Chinese attach a great amount of reverence and awe to the Jint San. It must be handled with solemnity and approached with ceremony."

"So I put on the ancient ceremonial robes I had brought with me, having sent Wung Goo to arrange about bringing up my motor boat. For the roots must always be transported by water or they lose their value. I met Mr. Tolliver in the little spring house and we agreed upon a price."

"Did you see us spying on you through the hole?" asked Bob.

"I had my suspicions someone was there," answered Moi Fong. "But I thought it was my business rival, Lui Chang. Soon after I arranged to leave New York to come here by plane, I heard that he had learned, in some way, about the Jint San roots up here and was going after them. It was to foil him that I hid the box of roots in the tunnel, the existence of which I made sure of after leaving Mr. Tolliver. I suspected there was a big cavern back of the rocky wall where his spring was, and it proved true. But I thought it would be safe to leave the Jint San and my ceremonial robes in there while waiting for my boat."

"You had more than one robe," remarked Harry.

"Yes, for I have robes belonging to those associated with me who also wished to pay due reference to the Jint San, and the yellow robes must always be worn," said Moi Fong in measured tones.

"An' then you boys butted in!" chuckled Mr.

Tolliver who seemed, now, to have forgiven Bob and his chums for their part in the strange mix-up. "'Tarnation! I never knowed there was such a lot of tunnels an' caves underground on my land!"

"Did Uncle Tom know?" asked Bob.

"Don't believe he did. You see arter I found out these roots had some value, from what the laundryman told me, I didn't say nothin' t' my brother for fear it would all peter out. But it didn't, an' now he knows all about it."

"So you found my box and robes, and made away with them; did you?" asked Moi Fong of Bob and his chums.

"Yes, and we have had a dickens of a time ever since," answered the young detective. "But I guess it's all over now."

"Very nearly," agreed Moi Fong. "You see after you picked up my box and disappeared, I and my men, searching the tunneds, found traces of you. Not knowing you were residents in the household of Mr. Tolliver, I thought you were emissaries of Lui Chang, and when I saw you emerge near the river, where my boat was moored, I gave orders for your capture."

"Well, you captured us all right!" chuckled Ned.

"I am sorry for any inconvenience I caused you," said the Oriental with a sly smile, "but it

seemed necessary. However you appeared able to take care of yourselves," he added, dryly. "You puzzled me when you refused to give up the Jint San, though."

"We didn't know what it was," observed Harry.

"No, I suppose not. Well, taking you for agents of Lui Chang I was holding you for hostages and was on my way to New York when my boat had a slight accident and nearly ran into the bank. That's when you escaped."

"Yes, we got off!" chuckled Bob.

"And, all the while, the Jint San was back in the tunnel," added Harry.

"I wish I had known that," said Moi Fong with a smile. "It would have saved me much trouble."

"But how did the box get in the hole where I dropped on it?" asked Bob.

"Lui Chang's men must have found it and hidden it there. He, too, complicated matters. But now he has taken himself away and all is peaceful and serene." Moi Fong motioned for his giant bodyguard to pick up the metal box of roots.

"If you don't mind telling us, Mr. Tolliver," suggested Bob when these explanations had been made, "where did you get that box?"

"I used t' be express agent here in Midvale." was the answer, "an' when I give up I took this

little iron chest. Nobody else wanted it. Ye boys comin' back t' my place t' board out what ye paid?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Guess we might as well," assented Bob. "How about it?" he turned to his chums.

"Sure!" they agreed.

"And would it be too much trouble, Mr. Fong," went on Bob, "to let us see that little plane."

"With pleasure," was the courteous reply. "I shall not go back in it with the Jint San," and again he spoke with reverence, "but my friend will fly it," and he nodded to the giant. "I am now going to my boat," he concluded, "where at any time I shall be glad to receive you as—my *guests!*" He stressed the word with a twinkle in his black eyes.

"Thanks! We'll drop in," said Harry.

"Is ginseng really thought so much of in China?" asked Bob of Dr. Tayton when the Orientals had departed with their box of treasure.

"You have no idea how highly it is regarded from the standpoint of money and health," was the answer. "In ancient times the root was supposed to have marvelous powers in restoring lost physical strength. This was principally due to the fact that many of the roots are forked like the letter Y, and so resemble the legs of a man. The Chinese argued that if it *looked* like a man it would *benefit* a man. So, from ancient times, the

roots, mostly dug in Korea and Manchuria, have sold for fabulous prices. When some of the same kind of roots were found growing wild here in the United States, many persons made small fortunes."

"It's quite a story," commented Harry.

"There's one thing I forgot to ask Gib, but I suppose I can do it later," said Bob. "And that is to find out what was in the red bag he and Moi Fong brought in that midnight."

"Probably more roots," suggested Harry, and so it proved.

"The old Chinese physician told me," went on Dr. Tayton, "that in the Orient ginseng is often sent as a most valuable present from one friend to another. With a supply of the root is sent a double boiling kettle of silver in which the medicine is to be steeped, rice being cooked in the outer and ginseng in the inner vessel. When a Chinese doctor prescribes ginseng for a patient the latter is allowed to drink no tea. And when you recall how fond Chinese are of tea you can judge what importance they attach to this queer root."

"Is there any real medicinal value to ginseng?" asked Ned.

"We western physicians don't think so," spoke Dr. Tayton. "It is not in the same class with my tonic, which costs much less. Well, I must be on my way to benefit humanity," he concluded. "Will you honor me by dining in my Ark?" he asked.

"Well," mused Bob, "seeing that it's about time to eat, and that we are a distance from Midvale, and that maybe Ma Tolliver won't expect us, perhaps—what do you say, fellows?"

"I say yes!" cried Ned.

"Count me in," begged Harry.

"I should, also, esteem it an honor," murmured Mr. Muzzlewig.

A little later they were seated about the table in the Ark partaking of another roast chicken with all the "fixings." And when he had eaten well Ned pushed his chair back with a sigh of satisfaction and remarked:

"I think we have sort of put Midvale on the map."

"You mean Bob's discovery of the cave?" asked Harry.

"Sure! When the papers get hold of this story about the big hole underground there'll be lots of visitors out here. But say, I wonder what made that powerful wind down there?"

"It was probably caused," Dr. Tayton explained, "by a change in temperature of the air. Heated air rises you know, and, flowing out of the tunnel would cause a vacuum into which colder air would rush. That is what always causes winds." Later the boys found this to be true.

They slept that night in the Tolliver home again, planning to finish their vacation with less

strenuous sports than solving mysteries. Moi Fong, with his followers, had left town and so had the rival Tong, and Mr. Muzzlewig's statement that casualties seldom followed outbreaks between the two factions was borne out. Not a single dead Chinese was found.

Uncle Tom thanked the boys for their interest in his behalf, all unknown to him, and said he had often seen ginseng roots on the farm but had never thought they were worth anything.

"An' t' think of brother Gib an' that Chinese goin' out at midnight t' dig up a red gunnysack full, an' doin' it on th' quiet for fear of disappointin' me—that sure is funny!" laughed Uncle Tom.

Neither he nor his brother, nor anyone in Midvale so much as dreamed of the big extent of the caves and tunnels under the town. There had been an old story to the effect that there was once a mysterious river which disappeared underground, but no one paid any heed to it. And though some knew of the holes in the ground, by which Bob and the boys had entered the cave, none suspected that they were any more than the den of a fox or bob-cat.

One day as the boys were walking across the field near where the aeroplane had disappeared so strangely, Bob Dexter was observed to give himself a substantial, rearward kick.

"What's that for?" asked Harry.

Bob pointed to the big stack of bean poles and said:

"Because I was such a chump as not to think of looking behind them for the little plane."

"Don't feel too sore about that!" chuckled Mr. Muzzlewig, who was preparing to take his departure. "The best way to hide a thing is in a conspicuous place. That's an old trick. I've been fooled by it myself. That which is so very obvious is often overlooked."

"Maybe that's how you'll find the man you're after," suggested Ned.

"Maybe," agreed Mr. Muzzlewig.

"And when you find him will you tell us the story?" asked Bob.

"Sure!" agreed Mr. Muzzlewig.

Three days after he had departed and the boys were rather regretfully thinking over plans for returning home, following a ride in the little plane before Wung Goo flew it back to New York, Bob called to his chums:

"You fellows want to come with me?"

"Where?" asked Harry.

"To solve another mystery."

"What kind?"

"I'm going to see if the fish will bite," and, shouldering his pole he tramped off, followed by Ned and Harry.

THE END

